

# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES** of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 9 March 2017 at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

**PRESENT:**

Cllr Tony Blackburn	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People
Dr Richard Castle	
Cllr Tim Harman (Chairman)	Cllr Brian Robinson
Cllr Richard Leppington	Cllr Jack Williams
	Cllr Lesley Williams MBE

Officers in attendance: Vicki Butler, Deputy Director Safeguarding and Care  
Suzanne Hall, Finance Business Partner  
Helen Price, Lead Commissioner Families  
Linda Uren, Director of Children's Services  
Tammy Wheatley, Head of Service (Permanence)

Apologies: Cllr Joe Harris, Cllr Tracy Millard and Cllr Pam Tracey MBE

## **45. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

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

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

- 46.1 The minutes of the meeting on Thursday 12 January 2017 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.
- 46.2 In response to a question it was explained that the initial scoping exercise for the proposed permanent exclusions task group would be drawn up in time for the start of the new council.
- 46.3 The Chairman took the opportunity to thank all members of the committee (current and former), and officers, for their work in support of the committee.
- 46.4 The committee wished to send a message to all children's services staff thanking them for the great job that they do, and ensuring that they understood that their hard work was appreciated and valued by the committee.
- 46.5 The committee also thanked the Ambassadors for Vulnerable Children and Young People for their great, and valuable, contribution to the work of the committee.

## **47. SAFEGUARDING: REFLECTING ON THE COMMITTEE'S WORK IN THIS COUNCIL AND CHALLENGES FOR THE NEW COUNCIL**

- 47.1 The Chairman informed members that this was a good time to reflect on the committee's work, during the course of this council, relating to safeguarding matters. Committee

members agreed that the safeguarding framework (based on evidence based work from Research in Practice) had effectively supported and guided the committee and enabled members to achieve a thorough understanding of safeguarding children issues. The committee recommended this framework to the committee in the new council.

- 47.2 A significant piece of work identified during the course of the committee's work during this council had been the Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers Task Group. The committee received a detailed update on the work to deliver the recommendations of this task group (for information the presentation slides were uploaded to the council website and included in the minute book). Members agreed that it was good to see that the first Celebrating Social Work Day had been held in June 2016 to highlight and celebrate the good practice in place in Gloucestershire. The committee had hoped that some of the social workers who had worked with elected members on the task group could attend the committee meeting to discuss how things were progressing. Unfortunately this had not proved possible, and members therefore agreed to schedule this for a meeting in the new council.
- 47.3 The aim to have recruited an additional 50 social workers by the end of 2019 was challenging. Committee members were pleased to note the innovative approaches that were being used to attract social workers to Gloucestershire; and that the rate of turnover has dropped. The frontline teams were over represented with newly qualified social workers, and it was important to balance this out with more experienced staff. Members understood that having a significant number of newly qualified social workers did carry a risk; however, they also recognised that these social workers were well supported. As newly qualified social workers they were part of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) scheme, which was designed to help newly qualified social workers develop their skills, knowledge and capability, and strengthen their professional confidence. It provided them with access to regular and focused support during their first year of employment in social work. They were also supported within their teams.
- 47.4 The committee was informed that the council did still have to rely on agency staff given the number of newly qualified social workers in order to bring in the broader experience. Members were pleased to note that there was a regional protocol in the south west relating to workforce issues, including agency staff. This protocol included not employing agency social workers who have left local authority employment in the previous 6 months.
- 47.5 The committee recognised the importance of the links with the University of Gloucestershire. Members were informed that a new leader of the social work course had recently been appointed; and that a Principal Social Worker (PSW) had now been appointed to work with the university to ensure that the course elements were appropriate. This PSW would also ensure that placement opportunities were designed appropriately, particularly as over the next 12 months there could be around 50 placements in the county.
- 47.6 The Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People informed the committee that the Ambassadors were involved in the training of the new social workers, in particular, in relation to how they could engage with children and young people. She informed members that she did have concerns about the new social worker's ability in this regard, and questioned whether there was an opportunity for the Ambassadors to engage earlier in the process, perhaps as part of the university course. The Director of Children's Services acknowledged this point and informed the committee that she felt that this was something that the Principal Social Worker could take forward.
- 47.7 Members were reminded that the government has introduced an accreditation and skills requirement. The expectation was that all social workers who work with children and

families be accredited by 2020. Practice leaders needed to be accredited by 2018, although it was not clear at present which roles constituted practice leaders.

- 47.8 The committee was impressed with progress made against the task group's recommendations. However, members were disappointed that the recommendations relating to the better use of technology were not further forward. The general view was that improving ICT options could be transformational to the way in which social workers did their job. Members were informed that funding has been identified and a project manager appointed. The committee agreed that it would monitor progress on this matter in the new council.
- 47.9 With regard to ICT members were surprised to note that some of the detail received at the 'front door' still arrived by letter and fax, which meant that information needed to be entered into the system. The committee was informed that from 1 April 2017 a new online portal would be in place which would mean that information would be entered directly into the system. Members would be interested to understand how this progressed.
- 47.10 The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member Children and Young People to comment on progress. The Cabinet Member thanked the committee for its work over the course of the council, and that he had welcomed the findings of the social worker recruitment and retention task group. He informed the committee that he valued the investment in the Ambassadors, and the focus on aiming to 'grow our own' social workers. He was pleased that the council has been able, with partners, to start to develop the Intensive Recovery and Intervention Service (IRIS). He hoped that the current Ofsted Inspection would not impact negatively on our social worker's morale, and that he hoped that the social workers understood how they were valued.
- 47.11 The committee agreed that in the new council it would be helpful to consider issues using a select committee approach more often. It would also be important to ensure that the council continued to develop the conditions in which social workers could flourish.
- 47.12 The committee took this opportunity to reiterate it's thanks to the social workers for their commitment and dedication to what was a challenging job.

#### **48. ADOPTION WEST**

- 48.1 The Lead Commissioner Families and Head of Service (Permanence) presented this report. The committee had wanted to better understand the governments' policy that required councils to establish regional adoption agencies by 2010. The committee was informed that the expectation was that this policy direction would improve chances for children to be adopted, improve support and choice for adopters, and speed up the process for everyone involved. Member's attention was drawn to the fact that the Education and Adoption Act 2016 gave the Secretary of State for Education the power to require councils to transfer their adoption service into regional arrangements.
- 48.2 The committee was pleased to note that the structure of Adoption West was such that the local connection remained in place, and agreed that the new panel structure should enable greater flexibility. The North Hub would be based in Gloucester and panel meetings would be held here. Importantly the involvement of elected members in this process would continue.
- 48.3 The committee was concerned that there was the potential for the transition period to create problems, for example were we seeing delays, were our adoptions still progressing

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in a timely manner, were adopters losing confidence? The committee agreed that it would wish to monitor progress in the new council.

- 48.4 Members were pleased to note that each local authority would be able to scrutinise Adoption West; and if it was felt necessary there was also the potential for joint scrutiny work with the other local authorities involved.

## **49. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE FOREST OF DEAN**

- 49.1 Cllr Richard Leppington presented this report as Chairman of the task group. The committee had been concerned, for some time, with regard to educational performance at the secondary level in the Forest of Dean District area. The task group had been established to try and get underneath the issues. All bar one of the secondary schools in this area were Academies and it was therefore important to be mindful that these schools were directly funded by and accountable to the Secretary of State for Education, and responsible for their own improvement. The council therefore took on more of an influencing role. Task group members visited all bar one of these schools. They were grateful to the welcome and openness with which they were received.

- 49.2 The committee welcomed the report, and gave its full support to the recommendations.

## **50. QUARTER 3 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

- 50.1 The Director of Children's Services gave a detailed presentation of the report. The report included benchmarking information, which was particularly useful in helping to prompt questions, and identify where there could be learning opportunities. It was agreed that learning from other areas which were doing better than this council were important.
- 50.2 The committee noted that the direction of travel for performance across the range of indicators reflected the data in previous performance reports. The committee agreed that it would be important to continue to closely monitor these targets in the new council, and in particular whether the investment in social workers was making a difference.
- 50.3 There was concern with regard to risk SR7.4 educational outcomes for vulnerable children and young people. In addition to the information in the report the Director of Children's Services informed the committee that this trend has become more obvious recently, and it was important to unpick the underlying factors. One factor was that the local authority could not require an Academy to take a child it could only ask.
- 50.4 The committee would continue to closely monitor performance in the new council.

## **51. REVENUE MONITORING REPORT**

- 51.1 The Finance Business Partner presented this report drawing particular attention to the overspends and the reasons for this position and the mitigating actions identified to try and bring these budget areas back into line where possible, and/or reduce the overspend.
- 51.2 The committee reflected that the information in these reports had produced a consistent message throughout this council. Members remained concerned but recognised the hard work that officers have done, and continued to do, to maintain control of this budget area.
- 51.3 Members were particularly concerned with regard to external placements, and it was questioned whether a task group, in the new council, would be a useful option. However, the committee was informed that as part of the budget process in February 2017, there had

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been additional investment in this area. Members were also reminded that the Intensive Recovery and Intervention Service (IRIS) was in development and that this included providing in-county provision for these complex cases. The committee was assured that it would have the opportunity to scrutinise this service as it developed.

**CHAIRMAN**

Meeting concluded at 12.40 pm