

## Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

<b>Report Title</b>	Progress report on the work of the Gloucestershire Improvement Board.
<b>Purpose of Report</b>	To brief the Committee on the work of the Board over the last months, to highlight progress and areas where further work is required.
<b>Is this for information or decision?</b>	For information.
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<b>Key Issues:</b>	
To report on the progress in the work of the Board, the role of the Chair and the cross-partnership aspects of the work. In addition to reflect upon developments within the service, performance improvements and to highlight the critical areas where progress is needed in order to secure the sustainable improvements sought.	
<b>Recommendations to the Committee:</b>	
To note the report.	
<b>Financial/Resource Implications:</b>	
There are no new financial implications directly contained within the report.	

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report is prepared for the committee meeting on 16 July. It is my first report to the Committee since January 2020 due to the extraordinary arrangements with the Covid emergency. I am pleased to have this opportunity to provide the Committee with this report.
- 1.2. I am able to reassure the Committee that the Improvement Board and myself as Chair have remained as fully active as possible in the circumstances. The Board has met virtually on three occasions over the past months and I have continued to interview and consult staff and partners about the improvement process. This has all been virtual and by telephone. The Committee needs to be clear that my last actual visit to Gloucestershire was in February for the meeting of the Improvement Board.

## 2. Activity

- 2.1. In the period since my last report there has continued to be a significant level of activity including:
  - Four meetings of the Improvement Board
  - Regular discussion with the Director of Children's Services
  - Similar with the Cabinet Member
  - Meetings with the Chief Executive
  - Continued discussion with external partners on the Board, in particular the CCG and the Police
  - Meetings with front line staff and managers at the Forest of Dean, Cheltenham and Cotswold localities
  - Discussions with the Interim Director of Safeguarding
  - Regular conversations with the new DFE Improvement Manager
  - Meetings with the Directors and managers leading quality assurance and directing improvement work
  - Discussions with Heads of Service in the three localities mentioned above plus Gloucester.
  - A virtual meeting with the Ambassadors
  - Reviewing the Covid arrangements
  - Receipt and examination of reports including the Performance and Quality Assurance Reports.

## 3. Context

- 3.1. At the time of my last report to the Committee, pre Covid, the Service was facing imminent inspection and my judgement was that, although there was some progress, it was neither sufficiently fast or consistent for me to be able to offer the level of assurance I would have wished about a successful outcome of

that inspection. I talked again about the need for a more consistently forensic attention to the detail of social work practice.

- 3.2. Clearly the world has moved on significantly from that position with the intervention of the emergency and as a result of “lockdown”. As a consequence of this, Ofsted have suspended routine inspection activity. The timeframe for future inspection has, therefore, become much less certain and the Council appears to have a longer period of time in which to accelerate the pace of change. At the time of writing it is very difficult to predict when an inspection might take place.
- 3.3. What did occur was an additional, unexpected, monitoring visit from Ofsted in February. Feedback from this was available for the February Improvement Board meeting. The message from Ofsted appeared to be substantially the same as previous visits but there were some specific areas of concern raised alongside continued issues about the pace of progress. It is also the case that the tone of the feedback was less encouraging and conveyed a greater level of concern on the part of the Regulator. This rightly was a cause of concern for the Board.
- 3.4. As the Committee will be only too aware, shortly after this the need to move into Covid emergency arrangements occurred which has left the Service with two huge challenges. The first being to re-focus delivery to operate within the emergency regulations whilst also ensuring that children were seen and protected, new referrals appropriately followed through and children’s plans continuing to be taken forward. The second has been to ensure that the improvements in practice which are needed not only continue but do so more rapidly. This remains the challenge.

#### 4. Progress

- 4.1. As has, I am sure, been reported by the Service, new working arrangements have been set up and appear in practical terms to be working well. Staff are reporting to me that the communication is effective, the technology has worked consistently and working from home appears not to be presenting great problems for a large proportion of staff. My contacts with staff also have not revealed a high level of anxiety about the arrangements within offices for those staff who have to be there on any given day. Both the activity data and the anecdotal comments from staff suggest that visits are being made and referrals are being responded to in a timely way.
- 4.2. This has represented an enormous effort on the part of the Service to both set these up and to maintain them. It has been assisted by the fact that fewer staff than might have been expected have either been ill themselves or have had to self-isolate.
- 4.3. Again, as the Committee will know, this period has also seen the retirement of the Director of Safeguarding and the appointment of an Interim Director. This transition appears to have been relatively smooth, helped by the fact that the

now Interim Director was already working in the Service as part of practice improvement. As Chair I have had a number of conversations with her and am encouraged by her overall approach, her analysis of where the strengths and weaknesses lay and her appreciation of the pace needed to move the position forward. My wider consultations have not given me cause for concern that people may not be accepting the changes that follow. Indeed, I detect a clearer sense of unity and purpose amongst the management group. My discussions with the Board members suggest a significant degree of confidence in the approach being taken.

- 4.4. Without doubt the report from the last Ofsted Monitoring Visit raised questions and concerns within the Improvement Board. One of the consequences of this has been a refreshing of the Accelerated Improvement Plan. This is now a more focused plan, more grounded in the detail of practice with clearer actions, targets and clearer lines of accountability contained within it. This has offered a degree of greater assurance for the Board which has expressed the view that the plan is very much on the right lines and it is fully supported.
- 4.5. There have also been changes to the quality assurance system largely as a result of the Covid arrangements. For the initial months the normal case audit system was suspended. It has been up and running again from June onwards. This has not, however, led to a complete gap in audit activity but more targeted, specific audits into areas such as permanency planning, child protection planning and repeat planning. These have been extremely valuable and the audit reports have been recently shared with me.
- 4.6. Although they reveal some significant weaknesses in practice over a period of time, these serve to reinforce the knowledge arising from the routine audits in terms of the areas of practice which are leading to judgements of inadequate or requiring improvement to be good in the cases which have been audited. These thematic audits are not, however, providing huge encouragement that quality of work has markedly improved but are providing some greater depth of understanding of where some of the more specific areas of weaker practice lie. This all needs to be seen in the context of the regular QA reports continuing to highlight a higher number of cases judged to be inadequate than is acceptable.
- 4.7. On a more positive note the same reports continue to demonstrate that there is a significant and consistent body of work that can be judged as of a good standard and that within the targeted audit work some of the most recent work appears to have been meeting the standards needed to a greater degree. The Committee will also want to note that one of the targeted audits was carried out by one of the Council's Partners in Practice, so there has been a clear external eye at work. The Board will be looking for the outcomes of the June audits with anticipation.
- 4.8. The last few months has also seen a different level of engagement from DFE which will also be featuring on the Committee's agenda. This report will not attempt to duplicate that but it may be of interest to the Committee to know that there has also been an increase in the degree of communication between myself as Chair of the Improvement Board and DFE. In large measure that

direct communication has suggested a broadly shared analysis of the current position and the pace of change between us.

- 4.9. The Improvement Board has also met monthly since April. There is a further additional meeting planned for July. It will be my recommendation that monthly meetings should continue for the foreseeable future.

## 5. Analysis

- 5.1. As the Committee will have picked up from all of the reports it is considering at this meeting, there has been a considerable level of activity since my last report in January. All of it has been of great importance. In addition to any improvement work, the effectiveness of the arrangements the Service has made to deal with the Covid emergency and how quickly it was able to put them in place, are themselves strong indicators of its overall health and the quality of leadership supported by the wider Council. This needs to be effectively represented when inspection finally comes. All of this does, however, leave the question of what is the level and rate of progress with improvement?
- 5.2. The answer to this question in one sense is that there is not a great deal of evidence to date of a sustained improvement. If we look at the February Ofsted Monitoring visit, the targeted audit information, the QA reports and the Performance reports the picture is very much the same as in previous reports to the Committee. The data available so far suggests a similar pattern of variability in practice, a too high proportion of inadequate practice, some performance indicators which stubbornly refuse to move in the right direction. These points are to a degree balanced by a number of performance indicators in areas such as timeliness of visits, speed of dealing with referral, keeping in touch with Care Leavers and many others which stand comparison with other local authorities. As the Committee will be very well aware this would have described the position for some months prior to the recent emergency situation and which I have reflected in previous reports
- 5.3. Having said that, there does seem greater grounds for optimism than such an analysis would suggest. As evidenced by the revised Accelerated Improvement Plan, there is a clearly strengthened focus on the detail of social work practice and a clearer vision of “what good looks like.” In addition to this, the Essentials training module and the Practice Fundamentals policy are clear re-statements of the principles of good social work practice and both appear to becoming well embedded into the work of practitioners, many of whom have expressed great enthusiasm for them.
- 5.4. Further to this, there is a renewed drive towards improvement evident in the overall management of the service. Previous reports to the Committee have spoken of the need for such a drive and a focus upon forensic attention to detail of the minutiae of social work practice. There is greater evidence of this now than at the time of my last report and, I would suggest, at the time of the last Ofsted Monitoring Visit. Much of this is based upon the drive and the focus on

this detail on the part of the Interim Director of Safeguarding and real strength within the Improvement Team.

- 5.5. One of the strongest, specific example of this is the focus on quality control as well as quality assurance, a real drive to ensure that poor quality of work is dealt with and improved in the initial stage as opposed to identified as such at audit when a poor judgement is unavoidable. This emphasis, if embedded into everyday practice will make a huge difference and must be expected to lead to improved standards of practice. Added to this is the greater understanding through audit and other quality assurance work of specific areas of practice which need to be addressed in this way, areas such as:
- permanency planning for children in care
  - repeat work in the child protection arena, including decision making at case conferences
  - evidence of oversight and supervision
  - improvements in recording
  - stability of placement for children in care
  - reducing the number of changes of social worker a child may experience.
- 5.6. All of these points are clearly within the Service's line of sight and in such a fashion to be engendering a stronger sense of confidence that improvements will be achieved.
- 5.7. Further the speed and robustness to date of the emergency service arrangements which have been put into place do give an indication of the strength and resilience which exists within the Service. Nothing is, of course, perfect, but to date there would seem to be much that is positive to have come out of this experience. These remarks would include the setting up of the virtual court which, in my view, represents a major achievement and worth of note, although perhaps the judiciary's views are of greater significance.

## 6. Summary and Conclusion

- 6.1. The Committee is faced with the position where it is difficult to present a clear line of evidence of an increasing pace of and strength of improvement. There is, however, grounds for greater optimism than this suggests. The hope is that this is a matter of timing and that the impact of the changes that are being made will become apparent within the audit and performance reports. There is a sense of confidence that this will be the case in time and it is of great importance that the Director receives all of the support available to ensure that the anticipated service improvement occurs.
- 6.2. The Committee can have confidence that the direction of travel is the right one and the emphasis and targeted areas are in line with what needs to happen. What is less easy to be confident about is how long it will be before the Service reaches the consistent level of good practice that all wish to see but the signs are definitely more encouraging than at the time of my last report. How this

position may fit with any inspection timetable is a consideration on which it is difficult to comment at this time for the reasons stated previously.

- 6.3. The Improvement Board continues to work extremely hard to support this direction of travel. Multi agency working is reported to be strong in spite of the additional pressures of the last few months. Schools not being fully open has had an impact but the Council has worked hard to achieve numbers of vulnerable children attending school during the emergency. One should expect a surge in demand, however, when schools are fully functioning again.
- 6.4. The Board is in full support of the current direction of travel and recognises the need for clear pace and drive to achieve the improvements needed. That recognition is shared by the senior leadership of the Service and the Committee should recognise a stronger degree of optimism and confidence in a positive outcome than possibly existed at the time of the last report.

Andrew Ireland  
Independent Chair of Children's Improvement Board.