

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 1 December 2020 at the Virtual Meeting - Web ex meeting.

PRESENT:

Dr Richard Castle	Cllr Loraine Patrick
Cllr Chris Coleman	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People
Cllr Stephen Davies	Cllr Brian Robinson
Cllr Bernard Fisher	Cllr Lesley Williams MBE (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)	

Others in attendance: Andy Dempsey - Director of Partnerships and Strategy
Rob England - Head of Quality Children's Services
Suzanne Hall - Finance Business Partner
Chris Spencer – Director of Children's Services
Andrew Ireland – Independent Chair Children's Services Improvement Board
Richard Boyles – Cabinet Member Children's Safeguarding and Early Years

Apologies: Charlotte Blanch, Cllr Colin Hay and Cllr Alan Preest

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

2. OFSTED FOCUS REVIEW (OCTOBER 2020)

- 2.1 The Director of Children's Services (DCS) explained that this process had been very different to the previous monitoring visits. It had been undertaken under the full ILACS framework and involved 5 inspectors over a period of two weeks, with a mix of remote and face to face interviews. This was not about grading but getting a clear line of sight of the council's improvement journey.
- 2.2 The DCS informed the committee that he had been disappointed that the letter had started in the way it did, and had asked that the letter be re-ordered but this request had been refused. The disappointment was due to the fact that the initial paragraph was historical and did not reflect the changes that have been made to the service in recent months. However the letter did go on to acknowledge that there was a real change in the pace of progress.
- 2.3 The DCS explained the process and how the service had responded. He informed the committee that the inspectors had raised concerns about pre-proceedings and that the response to some families was over time. The service took steps to investigate and within 24 hours the DCS had been able to assure the inspectors that none of the children were in an unsafe position.
- 2.4 In addressing the points raised in the letter members were informed that the reorganisation of the edge of care service had already started ahead of the visit, but that the changes

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were at an early stage. In developing Trevone House the council had intervened in the market in order to expand the options for suitable placements locally.

- 2.5 It was explained that although the Virtual School received positive feedback from schools, the Ofsted Inspectors had identified that 5 of the 6 Personal Education Plans (PEPs) sample cases provided to them did not reach the required standard. The DCS informed members that he acknowledged that the Inspectors were correct; educational outcomes for Children in Care were still not good enough.
- 2.6 Verbal feedback from the Inspectors had highlighted the level of repeat work; the DCS acknowledged that the Inspectors were correct and that this was a sign that we were not getting it right in the first place. The DCS explained that this indicator is often one of the last to improve on any turn around journey due to legacy issues in practice
- 2.7 The Inspectors had commented positively on the Quality Audit process.
- 2.8 The DCS stated that the letter was more positive than negative, and this suggested that the council was looking at a probable 'requires improvement' rating. He acknowledged that there was still frailty in the improvement journey, but was confident that these issues could be addressed.
- 2.9 The Chairman of the committee commented that this was the most positive letter that he had seen.
- 2.10 Members were concerned as to the rate of (repeat) referrals. The DCS stated that we could not mitigate circumstances to the degree where we never have re-referrals, but this was an indicator of whether the service got it right the first time. It was explained that we did benchmark ourselves against other local authorities (LAs), and that we did have a higher rate than similar LAs; it was important that we challenged ourselves. It was important to note that the council was dealing with a legacy of referrals, and it was understandable that if families were not engaged with properly the first time they would not want to engage now.
- 2.11 A member stated that they found the Ofsted letter heartening, and showed the impact of the work that the leadership team had put in. However, the sufficiency of provision remained a concern. Issues relating to the number of foster carers, and the ability to bring new ones on board was a particular concern, as well as those children that were 'out of sight' during the pandemic. It was felt that it was inevitable that some children would 'slip through'.
- 2.12 The DCS informed the meeting that he was also concerned with regard to children hidden from sight. The DCS was clear that he did not think that children were safer because we had received less referrals. Schools were one of the main referrers and the closure of schools had impacted on the numbers coming through. Once schools were back to normal, post vaccine, what has been happening during lockdown might surface. He was clear that out of sight did not mean out of harms way.
- 2.13 One committee member was of the view that if the council was inspected now they did not think that the current rating would be upgraded. They stated that the council had been failing children and young people for eight years. They questioned whether the council would be able to respond to the expected increase in referrals when schools returned to normal.
- 2.14 The DCS stated that it was important that we did not forget what had happened in the past, but to focus on the fact that we were now in a different place to four years ago. The DCS

acknowledged that the council was not yet at 'good' but was confident that we were moving towards requires improvement, and if the current level of improvement was maintained then there could be some good features in the inspection report. There was a clear line of sight as to what was required.

- 2.15 The DCS informed the committee that a significant concern going forward was youth unemployment. Members agreed that this was of concern and also highlighted parental unemployment as a result of the pandemic, and the potential for this situation to bring more people into the system. It was noted that the council's Families First programme had performed well in terms of addressing family unemployment; it was noted that the government had agreed to continue this grant. Members were also informed that the Strategic Lead for Inclusive Employment had submitted a proposal to the DfE for funding from the Kickstart Scheme.
- 2.16 Members expressed concern with regard to the comments made by the Inspectors with regard to personal education plans (PEPs) and questioned where the main problem was. The DCS explained that PEPs were primarily the responsibility of the school; they should be challenged/supported by the Virtual School and the Social Worker if the individual was in care. The DCS was of the view that the LA needed to be able to provide the right blueprints for the plans, and offer training on these through the Designated Safeguarding Leads. This action was already underway following inspection in October
- 2.17 The Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years informed members that he welcomed the committee's questions and analysis of the letter. He stated that large LAs like Gloucestershire were difficult to shift, but felt that we had turned some of the corners, and the pace of improvement was now in a good position. The DCS stated that he was under no illusion that there was still some way to go. He welcomed the cross party support from members, and from colleagues in the Corporate Leadership Team. He was clear that what was important was that we have a service that works for our children and young people.

3. REPORT FROM CHAIR CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT BOARD

- 3.1 Andrew Ireland, independent Chair Gloucestershire Children's Services Improvement Board, presented his report. He informed members that the degree of consistency of views across the external scrutiny of the council's improvement journey gave a level of confidence. He felt that Ofsted's findings were very much in line with his own, and agreed with the DCS that the current position reflected a requires improvement position.
- 3.2 He explained that the Improvement Board has been using quality assurance and performance data to track process and look at specific areas, alongside his own activity as Independent Chair. The specific issues referred to in the Ofsted letter were already in the Boards' line of sight. It was important to note that within the improvement journey there was now a subtle shift away from just a focus on compliance but was now talking about value and quality and a focus on outcomes.
- 3.3 This was important as when the council received its full inspection it would need to be able to demonstrate more than compliance. He felt that the Senior Leadership Team were clear on this factor.
- 3.4 He informed the committee that social workers had by and large given a good account of themselves to the inspectors; it was good that the council now had social workers in place who could clearly demonstrate their knowledge of the children and families that they worked with. He was pleased to report that his interactions with frontline staff had shown

that staff felt that the LA was a doing a good job in supporting them through this challenging time.

- 3.5 He was of the view that there was now evidence of a change of pace and drive, and that Ofsted had recognised this. He agreed with the DCS that there was no scope for taking the foot off the pedal, and that the likely outcome of an inspection was requires improvement.

4. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK: PROGRESS UPDATE REPORT

- 4.1 The Head of Quality, Children's Services agreed with the DCS that over the last 18 months there had been an increasing acceleration of the pace of improvement including a clear improvement in practice; and welcomed the recognition of the viability of the quality assurance process by Ofsted. They reminded the committee that just over 22 months ago some intractable practice had been in place. It was now possible to see a marked reduction in practice that would leave a child in an unsafe position. Instances of weak practice have decreased and were increasingly moving into 'requires improvement'. During their last visit Ofsted did not find any child who had been left in unsafe circumstances.
- 4.2 The challenge for the council now was to shift the majority of practice from requires improvement to good. There were a core group of teams that were succeeding and demonstrating that it was possible to deliver good practice. But some teams were struggling. Coaching was provided to these team managers working on the barriers to them improving practice in their teams. It was possible to see the benefit of this coaching through the quality assurance process. Work was also underway on a new suite of performance tools.
- 4.3 Month on month the improvement in practice was evident, and we were drawing close to targets. The quality assurance process was indicating that the council was not just a learning organisation but also a doing organisation.
- 4.4 In response to a question with regard to those teams that were underperforming the committee was assured that a hard line was being taken. Coaching was not a soft approach, it was not counselling but rather an intervention. The DCS stated that it took time to develop a workforce. The council was in the position of having to develop what is in effect an immature workforce as we were not able to attract sufficient numbers of experienced external recruits. If we could not gain access to a pool of experienced people then we had to develop our own.
- 4.5 Ambassadors present at the meeting discussed the challenges that they, and people known to them, had experienced with regard to contacting their social worker(s) during lockdown. The DCS informed members that this was indicative of why we needed to continue to improve. He also stated that the Care Leaver service was under a lot of scrutiny, and was going through a period of transition. The number of Personal Assistants for care leavers had been increased last year and was being increased again; this would mean a smaller caseload. The DCS indicated that he was disappointed when he heard that phone calls were not responded to or followed up, but commented that it was important to note that sometimes young people also did not respond. He informed the committee that he was not happy with what he had just heard from the Ambassadors and would follow up with the Care Leaver Service who would be disappointed to hear the feedback from Ambassadors and would be determined to act on it.
- 4.6 In response to a question it was stated that there was little doubt that if we improved practice across the system then there would be a reduction in the number of re-referrals; and a greater impact on the lives of children and their families.

5. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

- 5.1 The Director of Partnerships and Strategy presented the report. He informed the committee that performance continued to improve in a good number of areas, but that there remained areas of concern – short and long term placement stability for children in care, stability of the social worker and readmissions and re-referrals. It was explained that some of the council's targets had been stretched to bring them more in line with good and outstanding LAs. Overall it was an encouraging picture but not where we wanted to be.
- 5.2 The need to ensure that the voice of the child/young person was heard at child protection conferences was discussed. Members were informed that analysis of conference minutes did show that almost all talked of the child/young person. The limitations of the LiquidLogic system mean that not all this information could be captured in the form. The Head of Quality indicated that he welcomed any ideas that the Ambassadors might have to improve this process.
- 5.3 It was commented that it was difficult to understand the shape of the foster care placements. The Director informed the committee that this data had only recently been made available in this form (July 2020). It was important that in-house capacity was properly utilised; receiving the data in this way had identified that in house foster carers had been underutilised. It was also important to note that a number of foster carers were shielding; this has impacted on 40 to 50 placements. We were working with foster carers to identify those that were available. The Director stated that we were now starting to see a better use of in-house capacity.
- 5.4 There was concern that the stability of social workers could have a significant impact on performance going forward. The Director explained that the situation has improved, but only marginally; as the workforce stabilised and we reduced the dependency on Agency staff the position would further improve. It was important to be able to demonstrate that although the practitioner might have changed that there was a consistent approach in the care of the child/young person; Ofsted had not identified that children were being left at risk due to this change.

6. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING

- 6.1 The Finance Business Partner presented the report, highlighting the overspends and the underlying reasons. With regard to the costs arising from the Covid-19 pandemic most of these would be covered from a grant from government.
- 6.3 It was noted that there has been an increase, over and above what would normally be expected, in the number of parents opting for elective home education (EHE). In response to a question it was explained that this meant that the funding for these pupils was returned to the centre and therefore lost to the county. This had a significant impact on overall funding. The committee was reminded that the council had no right of entry to homes where a child was being home educated unless there was a safeguarding concern. The DCS explained that we were not an outlier in this regard.
- 6.4 An Ambassador commented that in their view a factor in children and young people not wishing to go to school was bullying, both in school and online. Following a discussion it was agreed that bullying was an issue that the committee would need to consider in the next council, but it was important to note that the majority of schools in Gloucestershire held Academy status which set them outside the council's purview. How to look at this important matter would need to be considered within that context.

ACTION: Andrea Clarke

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- 6.5 Members were concerned with regard to home to school transport. It was explained that the pandemic had had an impact, and with the returns being so small for some providers they had elected not to bid for contracts. The market had been weakened and therefore there was a bounce back in terms of cost; when a contract was re-let it was usually at a higher price. Something that the council's senior leadership team would have to consider was whether the council needed to enter the market as a provider?

CHAIRMAN

Meeting concluded at 1.04 pm