

Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

Report Title	Progress report on the work of the Gloucestershire Improvement Board.
Purpose of Report	To brief the Committee on the work of the Board over the last months, to highlight progress and areas where further work is required.
Is this for information or decision?	For information.
Author	Andrew Ireland - Independent Chair of the Improvement Board
Key Issues:	
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.	
Recommendations to the Committee:	
To note the report.	
Financial/Resource Implications:	
There are no new financial implications directly contained within the report.	

1. Introduction

1.1. This report is for consideration by the Committee at its meeting on 15 July 2021.

1.2. Due to the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, it appears to be my first report to the Committee for just over a year. Re-reading that report I was at pains to make clear to the Committee that the work of the Board was continuing uninterrupted throughout the emergency arrangements. I am pleased to report that this has remained the case and the Board continues to meet monthly on a virtual basis and I have continued to have regular discussions and meetings with relevant staff and Board members in between meetings, also virtually.

1.3. Unfortunately, because of a personal bereavement, I had to step away for a few weeks. I am grateful to both the Authority for its patience and to Claire Burgess from DFE who chaired Board meetings in my absence.

1.4. It will take up too much of Members' time for me to list all of the activity over the time since my last report but in general terms I have continued to have discussions with:

- Directors and senior managers within the Children's Services
- Senior managers from other parts of the Council, including the Chief Executive
- Cabinet Member
- Board members individually
- DFE colleagues

1.5. Most importantly, I have continued to be able to meet, albeit virtually, with front line managers and teams. I am most grateful to them for making, at times, complicated arrangements to enable this to happen but it has been absolutely invaluable in order to keep in touch with how staff have been coping with the emergency arrangements necessary and how effectively they believe they have been able to work as well as how morale has been holding up.

1.6. There have been some changes in personnel on the Board during this last period of time but commitment from agencies remains very high and new members are already making a significant contribution to the work. My understanding is that in large measure all parties have been able to maintain their full focus and commitment to the improvement agenda throughout this unprecedented set of circumstances.

2. Position Statement

2.1. At the time of my last report, I was discussing the beginnings of some increase in the pace of improvement. This had followed on from an additional monitoring visit from Ofsted which had expressed concerns in this regard. It had also followed a change at Director of Safeguarding level which was also clearly demonstrating a positive impact. The analysis in that report was that there was greater cause for optimism at that stage.

2.2. The Committee will be pleased to note that any such optimism was well placed. The over-riding performance curve in the intervening period has been positive and the pace of improvement has been evident and achieved important results. This has been both in performance and improvements in quality.

2.3. The Committee will have seen that performance and response levels in many areas have improved and that improvement has been sustained. In addition, the case audit system has demonstrated that there has been an increase in the proportion of casework judged good or outstanding and a decrease in the proportion judged to be inadequate. This has at times met and exceeded the target.

2.4. A further focused visit by Ofsted in the Autumn reported positively on this renewed vigour and pace. The report from that visit was encouraging and also reflected accurately the position as it was. Ofsted's experience was one of observing a step up in the urgency in which improvement was being addressed. This was a very pleasing conclusion as it was wholly in line with my own analysis and that of other external observers.

2.5. It was also important that Ofsted recognised that the Council had made important strides in managing and maintaining services during the pandemic, also achieving a significant degree of success in so doing.

2.6. Whilst that was encouraging in terms of the conditions for improvement being more favourable, Ofsted were also clear that much remained to be done to achieve a more consistently high level of practice, greater stability and continuity for children and young people, improvements in educational performance for children in care and improvements in services for care leavers.

2.7. Members will have received detailed reports from that Focused Visit by Ofsted so this report will not go into further detail on it. Its particular value to the work of the Improvement Board has been as an important position statement at a crucial time in anticipation of inspection to come.

2.8. The progress of the pandemic has meant that that full inspection has not yet taken place although it would be expected to have done so by now. The visit provided further impetus to renew and maintain that greater urgency even in extraordinary working arrangements for staff. Members can possibly be reassured that in my measurement this momentum was maintained and to positive effect as outlined above.

2.9. There can be little doubt that it has been a monumental effort to sustain this in an environment where social workers are operating from home, largely separated from the normal mechanisms of peer support. Staff have talked about the strain it has placed upon them and a number had expressed to me their desire to be able to return to the office and, more recently, their happiness that a phased return is in progress.

2.10. As in so many ways, the third lockdown has probably been the most difficult for staff. There have been conversations and consideration about whether the improvement curve was flattening in this period which was arguably the case but the

most recent quality and performance reports seen by the Board offer further reassurance that the service continues to travel in the right direction.

2.11. It is almost inevitable that external observers will want to see the pace of change increased still further and this is the case. However, there needs to be a more nuanced and specific consideration of this point. There remain a number of specific areas of practice for which evidence of real improvement is awaited including stability of placements for children in care, continuity of social workers for children and their families, response to episodes of children missing are examples of this. Greater impact of practice improvement in areas such as these would be of huge significance in the context of the improvement journey.

2.12. It is also the case, however, that the recent period has seen developments in innovation, new services coming on stream and in quality assurance and improvement work. These include the exciting innovation of the virtual court which has reportedly won great approval from the judiciary and the opening of the residential provision at Trevone House which is attracting a great deal of positive attention and in its early days at least, appears to be delivering very encouraging outcomes.

2.13. The body of performance data and insights drawn from audit continues to be developed. The service is operating with more detailed and targeted knowledge and understanding of where the strengths and weaknesses exist within the service and have been able to more successfully deliver specific and targeted interventions.

2.14. Principal amongst these is the Team Improvement Programme. Using data to identify which teams are finding greatest difficulty in achieving improvement and positive outcomes from case audits. The programme works to deliver intensive input to those teams and has reached the point now where teams have moved out of the programme on grounds of sustained higher performance. I am also informed that it is the case that no team who has moved through the programme and out the other side has been required to go back in.

2.15. It also remains the case that the Council can continue to be assured of the robustness of the Service's case audit models. These are regularly evaluated externally, are seen as rigorous and do offer an effective indicator of progress. They have also stood up to scrutiny from Ofsted in monitoring and focused visits.

2.16. All of this continues to be in the context of the practice Fundamentals practice system. This is increasingly proving to have been a catalyst in this process. It continues to have a high level of "buy-in" from social workers and has been a key driver.

2.17. Reports and audits continue to suggest a strengthening of management oversight and supervision which is a hugely positive development. All of this is supported by the Academy which also supports the training for the Systemic model of practice which is now under way.

2.18. This report would be incomplete without reference to the problems being experienced with the ICT systems over the last few months. This has become the

major topic of discussion at the Improvement Board and with myself individually from senior manager and from front line staff. Whilst there has been some level of improvement, this is an area of risk to the Service.

2.19. There has been an impact in terms of recording, submission of legal documents and meeting timescales for case conferences etc. Added to this is the frustration being experienced by staff and managers. All of this does represent an inspection risk which has been extensively discussed at the Improvement Board.

2.20. Clearly the Council is fully aware of the full range of the problem and improvement is expected but the Board has been informed that this will not necessarily be rapid. The problems appear, however, to be having a detrimental impact on the improvement programme.

2.21. A further development of specific note in the work of the Improvement Board has been a change in the method of engagement with and input from the Ambassadors. The need for this has arisen from the need for Board meetings to be virtual. This has made it very difficult for young people to attend as would have been the case previously. The change has been that the Ambassadors have produced videos discussing issues of concern to them and commenting on agenda items being considered by the Board. The contents of the videos are discussed at Board meetings and a response to the issues raised is sent to them from myself as Chair. To date this approach has been well received on all sides.

3. Analysis

3.1. This report comes to the Committee at an interesting time. It is now over four years since the last full inspection and, unless there is an announcement in the next few days, the Council is still waiting for a further visit from the Regulator.

3.2. Whilst there is always more that can be done and any time can be used constructively, the anticipation is a strain on everyone involved. There is also a risk that perspective becomes very short term. In my view, however, the Service does continue to hold the long-term view about where it needs to go, irrespective of an inspection date. That ambition remains to offer a consistently good service to children, young people and their families. There remains much work to be done to achieve that.

3.3. Having said that, this most recent period has seen the continuation of the much clearer drive for practice improvement which was indicated earlier. As has been noted, Ofsted commented on the greater urgency evident at the time of their last visit and the Board has seen evidence that this urgency has delivered a level of sustained improvement. Much of this has been in areas which sit comfortably with the areas highlighted in Ofsted's last visit.

3.4. There is evidence that practice has improved, there is a higher level of good and outstanding practice across the Service, management oversight and supervision is stronger and the Team Improvement programme is well embedded. Performance

management and quality assurance has continued to strengthen. All of these are very encouraging and important factors.

3.5. Importantly, in addition to this, a great deal has been achieved in terms of managing the lockdowns over such a period of time. Precise comparative information is not really available but observation suggests that Gloucestershire has managed service delivery and communication across the emergency arrangements well and has succeeded in maintaining positive improvement progress throughout. This is a significant achievement and is illustrative of the capacity and focus that now exists within the Service.

3.6. It is a very encouraging sign. There have latterly, however, been some indications that there has been a degree of fatigue with the emergency arrangements coming in to play. This is understandable as working from home for some creates as many problems as it addresses. The development towards a safe return to offices is timely and welcome and should prove helpful through the Summer and Autumn. It is to be hoped that it can proceed problem free.

3.7. There is, therefore, much for Members to be encouraged by but no scope for any easing of the intensity or drive for improvement. The strength and depth of more effective management throughout the service seems evident and this is only likely to develop further if the plans for re-modelling reach fruition. Cross agency relationships have remained strong through the emergency as evidenced by the swift completion of a multi-agency audit of thresholds. Effective use is being made of input from the Ambassadors in particular.

3.8. The question inevitably becomes whether all of this is now sufficiently well embedded to give all concerned confidence in continued improvement and, of course, effective inspection performance. It is difficult and probably unhelpful to suggest that there is a specific point in time when one can declare that this is the case but my judgement is that there is increasing cause for confidence that the Service is moving closer to it.

3.9. There are continued risks to such sustained progress. The most immediate at this point comes from the continuing ICT problems. If one assumes that there will be an inspection in the near to mid future, it is difficult to imagine that the impact of this will not be evident during its course. It will be important that the Authority can demonstrate a convincing and timely improvement plan.

3.10. Other risks are more generic. A deterioration in the recruitment and retention position would be potentially destabilising as would too radical a destabilisation of the Senior Leadership Team. These are constant risks of which the Service is well aware.

3.11. More specifically and tangible at this time is the fact that the long anticipated increase in demand as services re-opened across all agencies is now evident. This is a challenge not only in numbers of referrals but more importantly in the complexity of some of the circumstances coming to light. Increases in key activity figures are already apparent. There is also the possibility that a wider coming out of emergency arrangements across the community in general could have unpredictable and

destabilising consequences. The specific possibilities are wide and it will be important for the Authority to be across a broad data set and be scanning for trends in order to do its best to avoid being unprepared.

4. Conclusions

4.1. The overall conclusion of this report is that the Service has continued to make progress in its improvement project, illustrated by the recent updating of the Accelerated Improvement Plan. To have achieved this in the context of the pandemic is noteworthy to say the least and there have been significant achievements along the way. The committee can be assured that the focus and drive for practice improvement remains strong.

4.2. The service is not yet consistently good and it will take more time to achieve that position.

4.3. The key question becomes how fragile or well embedded are the improvements? The sustained improvements in performance can give a degree of confidence that they are increasingly embedded and that should continue. There is cause for hope of an encouraging outcome but nothing can be taken for granted.

4.4. The work of the Improvement Board continues to try and support this growing solidity of the service and the practice improvements. It does so with a clear sense of the service moving in the right direction and in anticipation of inspection to come.

Andrew Ireland
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