

# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 25 November 2021 commencing at 10.00 am at the Council Chamber - Shire Hall, Gloucester.**

## **PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:**

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Nick Housden
Cllr Alastair Chambers	Cllr Beki Hoyland
Cllr Linda Cohen	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Fiona Crouch	Cllr Emma Nelson
Cllr David Drew	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People

**Substitutes:** Cllr Stephen Hirst

**Apologies:** Cllr Andrew Miller, Cllr Ben Evans and Detective Superintendent Arman Mathieson

## **7. ELECTION OF CHAIRPERSON FOR THE MEETING**

Councillor Nick Housden was duly appointed as Chairperson for the meeting.

## **8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Emma Nelson declared that she had a pecuniary interest in relation to the Police & Crime Commissioner.

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

During the discussion, members requested an update in relation to the outstanding actions as detailed at paragraph 4.20 & 5.9 of the minutes.

### **Resolved**

**The Minutes of the previous meeting held on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2021 were approved as a correct record.**

## **10. SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE**

10.1 The Committee was pleased to welcome Dr. Marion Andrews-Evans, Chair of the Partnership and Dave Jones, Partnership Business Manager to the meeting. It was noted that a copy of the Annual Report had been circulated prior to the Committee meeting.

- 10.2 It was explained this was a true partnership of equals who worked closely together to ensure the safeguarding of Gloucestershire's Young People. Dr Andrews-Evans advised the committee that the Annual report detailed the work that had been undertaken. The report reflected how the Partnership had operated and the focus groups which had undertaken detailed work on high priority areas.
- 10.3 The Committee were advised that it was rewarding work and there had been a number of rapid reviews undertaken within the last year. Systems were now in place to act quickly in terms of safeguarding and to ensure the appropriate action was taken. As such there were shared, joint lessons and practices in places.
- 10.4 The Partnership had received a visit from the Chief Social Worker for England, it was reported she came to learn from the Partnership as it was deemed to be an exemplar and was regarded as a very positive endorsement.
- 10.5 Members wished to know if every child's death was reported to the Partnership and how this worked in association with the Coroners Office. Mr Jones explained that his team were notified of any child deaths in the County and they reviewed any death in terms of safeguarding. They also worked closely with the Coroners Office who were directly involved with child death reviews.
- 10.6 The Committee questioned the images used in the Annual Report, some members felt they were slightly incongruous given the topics discussed. Some felt the pictures were more reflective of those children who led aspirational lives.
- 10.7 Members were advised that young people's mental health had declined considerably during the pandemic and the number of referrals had spiralled, therefore additional funds had been made available to provide the required support. Dr Andrews-Evans explained the area required specialist staff to deal with the issues and given the employment situation, it was proving difficult to recruit the staff required. It was noted that a Trail Blazer Project had been established in schools, as the key was to catch children early before more specialist help was required. The Committee were advised the Trail Blazer Project had received positive feedback but the long term implications were unknown at this stage.
- 10.8 In terms of online engagement during the pandemic it had been necessary to work smarter in in order to reach young people. It was explained that most of what had been put in place had worked well and would continue. In addition nurses had found a higher engagement with health checks online and that would continue.
- 10.9 Multi-agency partnership working group attendance had improved by offering virtual meetings, as professionals could simply log in during their working

day and not have to take time out in order to travel. Virtual meetings had also improved the turn around times and led to far better engagement, as such this working practice would be retained.

- 10.10 Members welcomed the Annual Report and generally felt the structures in places were solid. Members wished to know how independent was the independent scrutineer and for what term was this position appointed too. The Committee were reassured that the scrutineer role was very independent and the partnership had carefully appointed to the role, to ensure impartiality and independence. This role would be for a three year period, with the option to increase if deemed necessary.
- 10.11 The Committee were advised that the Partnership was established in 2018 and was now chaired by the Clinical Commissioning Group. Gloucestershire was recognised as being ahead of the game and was a learning environment.
- 10.12 The Director of Children's Services (DCS) agreed to look at the pictures within the report. He also recognised the children's mental health was a key consideration for the emerging integrated care partnership and would remain on the agenda. It was also being dealt with by child friendly Gloucestershire, who looked at children's well being. There had been some positive steps throughout Covid, primarily the relationships with school had improved significantly, due to a strategic approach to various issues
- 10.13 The DCS echoed the Chair of the GSCP statement that Gloucestershire was ahead of the game and ahead of the curve, hence the Chief Social Worker visit. He welcomed the new collaborative approach and confirmed there was now equal ownership between the Police, Health and the Local Authority, which had a resulted in a genuinely shared endeavour.
- 10.14 Members recognised that the number of children being home schooled had increased, they questioned how safe were those children who were not seen on a daily basis. The DCS added before Covid there were concerns for the children who were out of mainstream education for various reasons. It was noted there were approximately 1400 children in Gloucestershire who were out of mainstream education but vast majority were due to parental choice. He explained there was no issue with home schooling providing a broad and balanced curriculum was being provided, however in these circumstances the Authority had no powers of entry. Powers of entry were only available if there were safeguarding concerns, it was recognised that children at home were at greater risk of exploitation. It was noted Central Government were looking at this area, it was anticipated there would be a change in legislation in the future. Partner agencies were also asked to be extra vigilant and report any concerns, it was a question of communication and increasing awareness to be vigilant.
- 10.15 A member referred to a horrendous case of child rape and grooming gangs in Hull. He wondered how many safeguarding warrants had been executed

in County in relation to child exploitation. Sue Fereday was unable to give the exact number of warrants issued but advised the Committee that last month a child was rescued from a car wash and the perpetrator was being prosecuted. Members were advised this was a high priority on the Constabulary's agenda. A criminal exploitation and missing child team had been established who looked specifically at criminal child exploitation.

- 10.16 In response to a question, Members were advised that a comprehensive database was in place to monitor vulnerable children and there were processes in place for the tracking and tracing children. In addition there were statutory ways of working which were approached on a multi agency basis. This ensured the appropriate plans were in place for those who needed them and those plans were reviewed on a multi agency basis.
- 10.17 Members had concerns for those children who were not on the system or on social services lists. The Interim Director for Children's Safeguarding & Care explained there was a high premium on raising awareness and vigilance as professionals and within the community. As a collective, there was a shared duty to identify those most at risk, which included a vast array of professionals and family members.
- 10.18 Members appreciated the comprehensive report and wished to know further in terms of the issues of recruiting staff to cope with the increased demand of mental health in children which had deteriorated over the last 18 months. The Chair of the GSCP explained there was no easy solution, as it took time to train expert professionals and the Partnership was working with Gloucestershire University to facilitate more placements and the student nurses through the mental health programme. There were alternative roles that were quicker, it was noted that school nurses were often the first safe point of contact. It was explained that due to an influx of referrals it had been necessary to use a priority system.
- 10.19 It was recognised that professionals also needed support with their wellbeing and a 'Be kind' initiative had been introduced, which was proving beneficial as staff need to feel supported in order to carry out their roles to the best of their ability.
- 10.20 The Committee were advised that peer on peer abuse had increased and there had been some tragic cases due to online bullying. It was recognised that children had previously kept many of the issues to themselves. The DCS had met with Gloucestershire Youth Parliament about this issue and had committed to writing to schools to raise awareness. It was recognised that these issues were more readily reported and were now taken more seriously.
- 10.21 Sue Fereday explained peer on peer abuse was investigated where possible, but it was important not to criminalise children. An extensive media campaign had been undertaken promoting trusted adults, the signs of child

exploitation and how to report it. In addition, staff were being trained to be more informed and better equipped to deal with such situations.

- 10.22 Members requested to know the number of children being referred to MASH. The Interim Director advised those being home educated would not have the same contact with those outside of the home. Where there were safeguarding concerns for a child being home schooled it was necessary to be extra vigilant, as they were not seen on a daily basis.
- 10.23 The DCS explained there were fewer eyes on home schooled children, therefore the number of referrals wasn't an indicator to be relied upon.
- 10.24 It was suggested in terms of school nurses, perhaps money needed to be invested to ensure that children had access to school nurses, as they were a huge asset and usually a first point of contact. It was remarked this area needed investment now, in order to save in the future.
- 10.25 A member felt that punishments for sex offenders were not fitting for the crime. Given that perpetrator often had a light punishment and the abused child was left to deal with the crime for the rest of their lives. He wished to know what Gloucestershire Safeguarding Partnership was doing in terms of lobbying the Government and Justice system to increase sentencing for child related sex offences. Sue Fereday explained the Constabulary would appeal to increase if they felt a sentence was too lenient. The DCS explained his preference was to prosecute a case, as this gave a clear message of non tolerance, abhorrent and unacceptable behaviour. It was essential that all agencies worked together to give a clear message.
- 10.26 Members suggested that perhaps the Partnership could lobby the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to make child sex offender's punishments reflect the crime and stronger sentences should be issued. Officers explained that they didn't disagree with the sentiment but in reality the Authority's persuasion was limited. It was suggested that the Police Federation Authority would be better placed to lobby the CPS. Members were advised that sentencing was set by national guideline, as this was dictated by case law.
- 10.27 Members wished to know if the appointment of the specialist safeguarding lawyer had been progressed. Officers explained this was currently a draft proposal and was still being considered at this stage. Members felt the recruitment of this post should be progressed. It was noted that Legal Advisors assisted with civil orders in order to limit perpetrator behaviour. Members felt it was necessary to present the case in order to achieve the maximum sentence.
- 10.28 In response to a question, members were advised that reporting via social media was an area that needed development, as some platforms were not deemed to be secure. It was currently only possible to report via email. The

Committee noted the 'Mind of my own' app was available to report any issues in relation to social care.

## **11. IMPROVEMENT BOARD UPDATE**

- 11.1 Andrew Ireland, Independent Chair of the Children's Services Improvement Board presented the report in detail, he explained that the Board had been very active since the last meeting.
- 11.2 The Chair of the Improvement Board added that staff should be congratulated on their efforts, resilience and flexibility during the pandemic. However, the Board recognised that fatigue was starting to take its toll.
- 11.3 It was recognised that the recruitment and retention of staff was becoming more difficult and there was some re-emergence of agency staff issues, which inevitably put strain on the service. Members hoped the long awaited Ofsted inspection would happen sooner rather than later, as this impacted on the recruitment of staff.
- 11.4 The Board felt the service was moving in the right direction, however, they would continue to look at areas of concern.
- 11.5 In response to a question, the Interim Director of Child Safeguarding explained that social workers once qualified were registered and reviewed on a regular basis. It was noted where there were any areas of concern they could either self refer or be referred by the employer. It was common courtesy if a social worker was moving on to tell the people they were working with and these issues were dealt with sensitively and respectfully. As this could have a destabilising effect on a family if it was not managed well.
- 11.6 Members welcomed the report and felt the findings were balanced. The Committee felt it was a disgrace that Ofsted had still not set a date for the re-inspection and the delay was having immeasurable damage on the service and staff morale.
- 11.7 In response to a question, it was explained that exit interviews were undertaken in order to gain an understanding of why staff were not retained. The Chair of the Improvement Board added that he'd not had the opportunity to speak to leavers but he believed there was a mixed picture of reasons, which included ill health, career relocation, etc. Officers explained that many people re-evaluate their careers and there were issues of retention. It was recognised that exit interviews were valuable sources of information.
- 11.8 The DCS informed the Committee that he had written to Ofsted regarding the delayed inspection, he recognised that it was having a negative impact on the recruitment of staff.

- 11.9 Members referred to paragraph 2.5 & 2.6 of the report and felt these points were areas of concern. The Chair of the Improvement Board explained that there were genuine staffing issues but the commitment from the Authority was there in abundance. The Board recognised that the Council had done as much as it possibly could to recruit staff, however, the long standing Ofsted judgement was a hindrance and prevented the service from moving forward. The delay had caused further uncertainty and reputational damage. The Committee were advised that Ofsted had not undertaken any inspection visits during the last 18 months.
- 11.10 In response to a question, it was explained that the Board had seen major strides in the quality assurance framework and in general terms the quality of social work practice had improved significantly.
- 11.11 The DCS advised the Committee that since he had been in post the children in Gloucestershire were now safe. The Committee were advised that good progress had been made since 2017, but the aim was to strive to provide a good quality service for the children and young people of Gloucestershire, as they deserved nothing less. The Committee welcomed this statement and felt reassured.
- 11.12 In terms of concerns the DCS advised members there were areas that still needed improving and there were a considerable number of social work vacancies, which presented a major challenge. In terms of agency social work staff this figure was now at 24%, with the target being set at 15%. One of the main areas of concerns was the lack of local good quality care provision.
- 11.13 In terms of staff retention, some members felt it was necessary to incentivise staff to remain. The Interim Director explained there was an incentive scheme in place and the service had previously recruited from overseas. It was recognised there was a national shortage of social workers. Members appreciated the need to get the balance right, by creating the right conditions in terms of case loads and management oversight. Annual health check surveys were undertaken by the principal social worker, in order to monitor staff morale, leadership, etc.
- 11.14 The Committee were advised that staff who didn't meet the required standards or performance were moved on and some of the churn was down to the Authority, as the service didn't want a sub-standard service and poor practice was challenged. In response to a question, it was explained that poor social working performance in terms of misconduct was reported to the regulator.
- 11.15 The Chair of the Improvement Board emphasised the importance of exit interviews, as there were lessons of subjectivity and the opportunity to draw issues out before staff left the Authority.

## **12. ACCELERATED IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

- 12.1 The Interim Director for Children's Safeguarding & Care presented the report in detail. The Committee were advised that there was a clear commitment to see children face to face and during the pandemic the service had continued to provide contact and support. The service continued to be focused on performance standards.
- 12.2 In terms of care proceedings during the pandemic, the judiciary system was disrupted, the Authority had established eight virtual court rooms to progress care proceedings to final hearings. As a result of the court recovery plan, two thirds of all children subject to care proceedings would be moving towards a substantive hearing in the next couple of months, which was a positive move for those children.
- 12.3 It was reported there were currently 836 children in care in Gloucestershire, which had resulted in further significant financial pressures and the service was overspent. The workforce was exhausted but resilient and there was a premium on staff well being, as without them there was no service. The service continued to be focused on standards.
- 12.4 It was noted that the last Ofsted focus visit took place in November 2020 and Ofsted determined the Authority had done well at that stage during the pandemic.
- 12.5 Officers explained that safeguarding teams were the most difficult positions to recruit too, given the specialist nature of the work involved, which had resulted in a pay differential. It was recognised there had been a significant increase and improvement in the quality of agency staff CV's. Children's safeguarding work was a complex area which often took its toll on staff.
- 12.6 In terms of locality teams, staff had been relocated to help cover areas. However, recruitment was well underway and a company called Innovate had been engaged to address high level demand in the court arena, in terms of permanence reports.

### **13. PERFORMANCE REPORT**

- 13.1 The DCS presented the report and drew member's attention to the slight drop in the Performance Indicators (PI's). Members were advised that the PI's were in accordance with other good authorities and shouldn't be taken out of context.
- 13.2 The Committee noted the report.

### **14. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK**

- 14.1 Rob England, Head of Quality & Safeguarding presented the report. He proceeded to explain that the performance report was more sensitive to change and that the quality assurance framework focused on a quarterly

period, to establish a quality of practice. Through the quarterly performance there was a rise in inadequate practices, which was unusual for the Authority. The signals in the system from the quality assurance indicators, suggested there was a significant turn from the previous positive trajectory. It was necessary to have responsive leadership intervention now and this has already been activated with corporate support.

- 14.2 The level of higher quality had been sustained for a considerable period of time, which proved there was evidence of the improvement journey in Gloucestershire. There was strength and resilience in the system to provide the better quality service that children and young people in Gloucestershire deserved.
- 14.3 It was noted there were 2 teams of concerns, compared to 18 months ago and leaders were aware of the issues. There were challenges in terms of timing of assessments that didn't make the use of information available in the system. It was recognised that the recording of assessments needed to be improved.
- 14.4 In response to a question, the Committee were advised the DfE were close partners with the Authority and were in regular contact in an effort to support and improve the quality of practice. Members were advised that reciprocal sharing of good practice arrangements were in place with other Authorities.

## **15. REVENUE MONITORING REPORT**

- 15.1 Suzanne Hall, Finance Business Partner presented the report. It was noted there was a £17.159m overspend, of which £9m related to Covid, which gave a net position of approximately £8m. Members were advised of the key points in relation to budget pressures, which included external placements, which is the significant element, the cost of safeguarding staff, SEN in relation to EHCP plans and home to school transport.
- 15.2 Members questioned the increased costs, it was explained that there were a number of strategies now in place to help control the budget implications.
- 15.3 The Interim Director explained that children needed consistency in terms of placements, as circumstances changed and it was imperative to work in the child's best interest. A permanence project had been established to ensure children were correctly placed in terms of consistency for the child in care. In addition, there had been a spike in the number of urgent care orders, in terms of safeguarding issues which inevitably had budget implications. The aim was to reunify children with their families if it was deemed to be in their best interest.
- 15.4 In terms of concern the DCS explained that it was necessary to intervene early to prevent children from going through the system. If the right processes were in place in terms of early intervention and if done correctly children could remain at home with the right support and processes in place. This would be

the less expensive option. Secondly the aim was to increase the number of in house foster placements locally, as external foster care placements were significantly more expensive.

15.4 Members were advised that residential placements were the most expensive and the two most expensive placements would cost the Authority almost £5m this year. Members were asked to consider this point in the context of the overspend. In response to a question, it was explained that the two cases required around the clock specialist care to keep them alive and safe. Members wished to extend their thanks to the staff that had to do what was necessary in these difficult circumstances.

15.5 It was suggested that care company margins in terms of staff costs were significant, members wondered if it would be cheaper for the Authority to deal with an in-house service. The DCS explained that as part of long-term care transition, the Authority were building a specialist bespoke facility to care for these young people to provide them security for the future. Members welcomed the new approach of care.

## **16. OFSTED ANNUAL CONVERSATION OUTCOME LETTER**

16.1 The Director of Children's Services explained that the annual conversation had taken place, which had been challenging, however no insight had been provided in terms of the re-inspection date.

16.2 The Committee were advised this would likely be last meeting for the Interim Director for Safeguarding and Care as her contract was due to end on the 31st December 2021. Members wished to thank her for all effort and professionalism in conducting the role and wished her well for the future.

## **CHAIRPERSON**

Meeting concluded at 1.27 pm