

# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 10 March 2022 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.**

## **PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:**

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Beki Hoyland
Cllr Linda Cohen	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Fiona Crouch	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Cllr David Drew	Cllr Emma Nelson
Cllr Ben Evans (Vice-Chair)	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People
Cllr Nick Housden	

## **OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:**

Chris Spencer (Director of Children's Services), Kirsten Harrison (Director of Education), Andy Dempsey (Director of Partnerships & Strategy), Kanchan Jadeja (Quality Assurance and Improvement Consultant), Ann James (Director of Children's Safeguarding and Care), and Andrea Griffiths (Democratic Services).

## **9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Andrew Miller declared he was in the process of applying to become a foster carer for the Authority.

Councillor Ben Evans declared he was a Director of a non profit organisation, Chime.

Councillor Linda Cohen declared she was a Director of Read with Me CIC.

## **10. NOTICES**

The Chair wished to thank Fiona Crouch, Parent Representative for her contribution to the Committee, and wished her well for the future.

The Chair also explained this would be the last for Andrea Clarke from Democratic Services as she was retiring. He added that Andrea had been a tower of strength to him and had supported the Committee with helpful and positive suggestions throughout.

*Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting*

Andrea thanked the Chair for his kinds words and added that the Committee had worked hard for the children of Gloucestershire and she wished them well for the future.

The Chair also welcomed the newly appointed the Director of Children's Safeguarding and Care, Anne James to the meeting.

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

It was agreed that the sentence at Paragraph 4.10 "that children were coached to pass the entrance test and many had shared tutoring sessions with friends" be deleted from the minutes.

### **Resolved**

**That subject to the amendment, the minutes of the previous meeting held on the 13<sup>th</sup> January 2022 be approved as a correct record.**

## **12. OFSTED INSPECTION UPDATE**

- 12.1 The Committee received a verbal update from the Director of Children's Services (DCS), it was noted that the report would be within the public domain on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022.
- 12.2 Members were advised that Ofsted Inspectors had been on site during the 7<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> March 2022 and had conducted their review but were unable to give their judgement on the service at this point in time.
- 12.3 The DCS hoped that the Authority would no longer be one that required intervention. He explained that the Inspectors felt significant progress had been made to date and acknowledged that 2017 was a low point for the Authority.
- 12.4 The Committee were informed that children in Gloucestershire were now safe and this was recognised by Ofsted. During the Ofsted Inspection visit a number of cases were considered by the Inspectors, who noted that processes were well managed and any information requested was provided in a timely manner.
- 12.5 The DCS advised Members that Information Technology (IT) was regarded as a major issue and this was now a key corporate recommendation for improvement. It was noted that by and large the Authority was aware of its strengths and weaknesses. As the service had also conducted a self assessment prior to the inspection team's arrival. The DCS explained there were some variations in practices and there were still caveats but the service needed to be consistently good for the Children and Young People of Gloucestershire and recognised there was no room complacency.
- 12.6 The DCS wished to record his thanks to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and frontline staff for all their efforts to bring about change, he explained that the job wasn't yet done and it was necessary to keep up the pressure to achieve

excellence going forward. The Chair on behalf of the Committee extended his thanks to the DCS and his team for their exceptional efforts.

- 12.7 Members of the Committee echoed the sentiment and thanked officers for their personal and professional commitment to the service and agreed that the only acceptable standard going forward was to strive for exceptional for the Children and Young People of Gloucestershire.
- 12.8 Officers thanked the Committee for their kind comments and added that it had been an exhausting journey but there was now a great Senior Leadership Team in place with a wealth of experience and knowledge and the future of that team was now secure. It was reiterated that children in Gloucestershire were no longer at risk and they were safe.
- 12.9 Members were informed there were two main challenges going forward, firstly the Liquid Logic IT System and secondly, the stability of the workforce. The DCS advised members there were still challenges with changing social workers and there were 27 vacancies to recruit too. He acknowledged that agencies caused issues, as there was a higher turnover of staff which further compounded the recruitment process.
- 12.10 In response to a question, the DCS explained in order to move forward there were still cultural barriers to overcome and it was not a time for complacency.
- 12.11 During the discussion it was noted that the Scrutiny Committee should look at itself as it had in the past not held the service to account. Members recognised that on going training was required and the Committee should be more robust in its questioning of the service going forward. It was suggested that perhaps a member only session could be held to discuss issues and concerns openly before officers were invited to advise.
- 12.12 The Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years wished to thank the DCS and his team for their high level of professionalism and he recognised that the long awaited Ofsted visit had increased morale. He added that the Ofsted report would undoubtedly signpost areas to monitor going forward and it was essential to build on the right framework going forward for the children of Gloucestershire.
- 12.13 The Director of Partnerships & Strategy advised the Committee that the metrics weren't in place in 2017 but reassured Members they were now and this was now supported by an objective performance framework. It was suggested that perhaps a training session on the insight and limitations of the framework could be beneficial for the Committee to develop its understanding.
- 12.14 The DCS explained that the role of scrutiny going forward was to keep the service on track in order to provide a high quality service and enable children and young people to lead fulfilled lives. He urged members to do their own research, in order to be reassured going forward.

12.15 Members welcomed the verbal update and looked forward to reading the Ofsted Inspection Report when it was published on the 1<sup>st</sup> April. The Democratic Services Adviser explained that initial report would be presented to Council first and then perhaps an extraordinary meeting of the Committee could be called for to discuss the reports finding in more detail.

### **13. DOMESTIC ABUSE**

13.1 The Director of Partnerships & Strategy (DPS) explained the report provided an update on activities carried out as a response to the findings and highlighted wider practice development as informed by the learning of recent Domestic Homicide Reviews.

13.2 Kanchan Jadeja, Quality Assurance and Improvement Consultant explained that regular feedback was received from service users and the service was developing as it progressed. Members were informed there was a considerable amount of partnership working in homicide review cases which involved the Police, Health and Adult Services. Officers explained more work was required around male victims of Domestic Abuse.

13.3 It was explained there were issues around recurrent removals, and the service now ensured that the child no longer resided with the victim and perpetrator of domestic abuse, the aim going forward was to safeguard the child and this required a collaborative multi-agency working approach.

13.4 Members wished to know how more support could be given to those women who had children removed, as their own mental health would be suffering given the situation they found themselves in. Officers explained there was a vulnerable women's project for women to receive support. The service had also worked with Gloucestershire University on a research report, which considered various operating models.

13.5 It was acknowledged that women who were victims of domestic abuse felt more comfortable in an environment that was led by women for women. It was noted the intention was to look at family centres for support, while working with social workers directly on the trauma of losing a child to care, and the added stress for the victim.

13.6 Members referred to paragraph 6.22 of the report, it was noted that 31% of victims were not offered a place of safety, yet 79% of offenders were given support, members questioned this imbalance.

13.7 Officers explained that domestic violence support was a complex process and had yet to be embedded within the appropriate services. The access to support was primarily focused on the victims, unfortunately some victims were so traumatised the access rate was low initially. In terms of access support for victims it was necessary to look at what worked in practice

13.8 In response to a question, it was noted the Domestic Abuse Strategy was reviewed every three years. Members suggested that perhaps the strategy needed to be

reviewed regularly as recent events during the pandemic had seen an increase in domestic violence. Members were advised that a joint meeting in association with Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee, would be held in due course as a result of a Council motion in 2021.

- 13.9 Members recognised that many women who served time in HMP Eastwood Park were due to domestic violence, it was suggested that women's centres would be more beneficial, as it would be better to rebuild women rather than incarcerate them. The DSP explained they were working closely with the Nelson Centre to provide support and advice. In addition, 'The Door' charity has commenced a mentoring programme, to divert young women away from the criminal justice system, members were encouraged to look at the work of the charity.
- 13.10 During the discussion, the Young Ambassadors wished to know what provisions were available for those who were not deemed to be high risk, and referred to page 42 of the report, that stated 105 Domestic Abuse victims were not able to be accommodated in places of safety. Officers agreed to investigate this point further outside of the meeting in order to address the concerns and a response would be provided.

#### **14. SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS - WHAT IS THE PICTURE IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE**

- 14.1 The Director of Education presented the report in detail which provided the Committee with a summary overview of the longitudinal position with regard to permanent exclusions from schools within the county and the emerging academic picture for academic years 2020-21 and 2021-22. Members were advised that the last complete published data set for permanent exclusions and suspensions was for 2019-20, the national published data was expected for 2020-21 in July 2022. It was explained that the Authority monitored the figures closely and followed up any areas of concern through the Inclusion Team.
- 14.2 The Committee noted the numbers of exclusions were unprecedented and this was due to the pandemic, the issue of schools opening and closing had significantly impacted on the data sets. It was recognised during the pandemic that schools were only open to the most vulnerable and children of key workers.
- 14.3 Members were referred to Chart 11 on page 76 of the report, which highlighted the pre and post Covid breakdown levels. It was noted there tended to be a difference between figures at a national and local level and the data was collated in arrears. It was noted the common reason for permanent exclusion was due to either persistent disruptive behaviour or violence against an adult.
- 14.4 It was noted there was an increase in Primary and Secondary School permanent exclusions in many areas cross the County and boys tended to have the higher rate of exclusions. There also appeared to be a link with children with EHCPs and those on free school meals. All those cases with EHCPs where children were excluded related to Primary School children recorded with social, emotional and mental health in terms of their primary need. As a result, the Committee noted there was also concurrent increase in Primary Schools requests for EHCP assessments.

- 14.5 It was suggested that academisation may be a factor in terms of the difference practices and activities across the county, which had contributed to the increase in the number of excluded pupils. During the discussion members questioned the 2020 figures, as those children who were in receipt of free school meals were five times more likely to be excluded or a boy etc. were more likely to be excluded.
- 14.6 Some members were frustrated with the report. It appeared that academies could exclude pupils for alcohol, drugs, etc. Members felt GCC had little or no power over the academies to change the mechanics. Members questioned the point of reporting such information, if it was out of the Authority's control.
- 14.7 The Director of Education (DoE) explained the report was initially requested to give the current picture and that had been provided, She didn't agree there was nothing that could be done about the situation. The Committee were advised it was a complex area, and academisation was one factor and it could be harder to influence them, although a communication forum was being developed with the whole school system to address these wider system issues, including exclusion, where all schools regardless of governance arrangements are represented.
- 14.8 It was noted all the LA alternative provision schools in the county were now judged good by Ofsted. There are things that the Authority could do and were doing but it was necessary to make sure all those levers work well together. It is essential to build on the broader working dynamics of the system to tackle the root causes across Gloucestershire.
- 14.9 The DoE felt it was catastrophic for a young person to be permanently excluded from school and there were things the Authority could do to assist and they were doing work behind the scenes. The Chair explained that the CFOSC scrutinised all of the children within the County and he felt there were things members could do especially within the realms of this committee.
- 14.10 Members wondered if there is a link between poor attendance and being excluded. The DoE commented that the impact of the pandemic with mental health issues leading to poor attendance was a concern. , Work was being carried out between CHAMS and the LA Inclusion team on this factor, but this was not a cause of permanent exclusion. It was noted that many teachers, frontline staff and children were exhausted and it was recognised that in some cases children's behaviour would get worse before it improved. The Committee recognised many of the issues could be attributed to the Covid Impact and this was a complex area of work that required synergy between all services and it was recognised that this is a national issue
- 14.11 Some members wondered if some academies were excluding children they didn't want in school via home schooling or off rolling. It was reported there was a statutory obligation in terms of reporting and recording of suspensions and exclusions. The Exclusion Team monitored and followed up any cases of concern and was aware of these potential issues in its work.

- 14.12 The DCS felt there was a need for a cultural shift in schools and the way they deal with permanent exclusions in secondary schools. He recognised there was an organisational difference between primary and secondary schools and their ability to retain difficult children.
- 14.13 It was reported that a proportion of permanent exclusions were due to a student carrying an offensive weapon, carrying or selling substances and physical violence. The DCS personally felt that children should be excluded for physical violence as this impacted greatest on the victim, both emotionally and mentally. He felt that to exclude a child for carrying weapons or substances was a missed opportunity for early intervention. By excluding a child, those issues would now be moved to outside of the school gate, when perhaps intervention was required in school. It was suggested perhaps adopting the shock and awe approach and the involvement of police and the appropriate services would help prevent an issue involving weapons and drugs from spiralling out of control further on down the line. There was a need for an educative approach, an opportunity to intervene and manage those behaviours and have a debate with socially with parents and schools.
- 14.14 Some members felt it was a fascinating and analytical report and questioned the number of physical assaults in 2019/20. The Committee wondered what were the reasons for this type of behaviour and if the initial problem started at home. The DoE explained that was the million dollar question and factors at home often related to a child's behaviour in school, therefore early intervention was a key factor.
- 14.15 The Director of Children's Safeguarding and Care (DCSC), advised the Committee that she would be working collaboratively with the DoE to look at the numerous factors that impact on young people. She recognised there were acute difficulties which would impact on the most vulnerable families over the coming 12 months and beyond.
- 14.16 The Directors recognised there was a need for collaborative work across the services and mobilising the support at the earliest point was of paramount importance. The DCSC explained in her previous post, response teams were put in place to go into schools to understand the issues as to why that child was carrying a weapon or substances and had the ability to input a plan to reduce risk and build support and reduce permanent exclusion, was regarded as a positive piece of work. It was necessary to understand what was going on outside of school and at home for that young person in the first instance. It was deemed to be a complex issue that required a wrap around approach.
- 14.17 During the discussion the DoE reiterated that some heads were forced into permanent exclusions by parent and staff pressure and it was necessary to have a collaborative approach to support heads to have alternatives to permanent exclusion.
- 14.18 In response to a question, it was explained that post Christmas behaviour was unravelling in schools. Some children were not learning anything and were manipulating the situation. It was recognised that there were higher numbers of exclusions in secondary schools, as children in primary schools tended to receive

more support from Tas and could remain in place. Officers felt that a lot of work needed to be done around the transition arrangements.

- 14.19 Members felt reassured by the collaborative working approach of DoE and the DCSC but felt that schools were funded to provide education and not social care and wondered if there was any further support that could be given to schools in this area. The DoE explained that it was variable and depended on the school and how they decide to deploy the resources. It was noted that social media played a contributing factor in peer on peer abuse.
- 14.20 The Cabinet Member for Economy, Education and Skills noted there was a positive trend in 2014-20 and he appreciated the concerns raised and echoed the sentiments raised by the Committee. He felt it would be interesting to see the verified figures in July 2022 and urged the committee to focus on the improvements made in recent years.
- 14.21 The Diocese representative felt many headteachers felt alone especially during the pandemic and they were alone at the rock face and had little or no support from the local authority. She recognised that a lot of issues were historic and the delay in the EHCP process during the pandemic had further compounded issues, which had significantly impacted exclusion figures. Members were advised about a school experience where the EHCP process had reduced from 20 weeks to 16 weeks currently in some cases.
- 14.22 The committee member stated that proactive support rather than reactive support was required. There was a growing number of heads that were becoming more trauma informed in their approaches and she had been trained in restorative practice, which involved a whole community approach and was more of a societal issue not just a school issue. It was recognised there was a balance of give and take and the positives should be highlighted more. It was suggested that this approach needed to be led by the Authority and the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), as this approach needed to be taken on board by the academy chains.
- 14.23 Trauma informed practice was needed for a whole society approach and it was a balance of give and take. In terms of the restorative programme, 12 primary and 9 secondary schools were now involved. It was suggested that heads and trustees of the academy chains need to be involved. The no child left behind initiative in Cheltenham could be used across the county and members were urged to investigate this project further. All schools should invest in becoming restorative practice aware in order to bring about an effective change at the heart of everything we do.
- 14.24 In response to a question, in terms of restorative practice Gloucestershire was a lead on this area regionally and nationally and peer working had been undertaken to share best practice methods.

- 14.25 Members welcomed a dedicated extraordinary meeting on restorative practice and exclusions and the RSC would be invited to attend, once the new data had been published in July 2022. (Action - AG to liaise with RSC July/Sept)

## **15. GLOUCESTERSHIRE EARLY HELP**

- 15.1 The Director of Partnerships & Strategy (DPS) gave a detailed verbal update on the current position. He explained the outcome of the Ofsted Inspection would inform the provision of early help. Members were advised that the graphic chart on page 82 of the report had been shared with the Inspection Team and was well received, the committee recognised that early help prevented escalation into the system later on.
- 15.2 In response to a question, it was noted that Communications Team were leading on the promotion of early help services. The DPS explained the children and family centres would lead on the development of family hubs. It was reported that this area of work was currently ongoing and an updated would be provided to the September Committee meeting.
- 15.3 The Committee felt family centres did a considerable amount of good work in the local community and offered critical triage in terms of early help and support. Members were urged to look at their own local communities in an effort to develop their own understanding on what services were available in terms of early help. Many members believed in a comprehensive service and recognised that it was important to reach out rather than narrow down services.
- 15.4 The Committee recognised that the eagerly awaited Ofsted Report would give the Committee a clear sense of direction in terms of the commissioning of services. The DCS anticipated that early help services would receive a positive response in the report. He added the number of children going into care had not decreased, as children were not leaving the care system as in previous years. It was recognised this was a national trend and there was a more complex picture rather than a straight forward correlation.
- 15.5 The Chair confirmed that family hubs were on the work plan for the September meeting, but wondered how we measure the value added element and wondered what evidence could be brought to Committee to show that over time.

## **16. COMMITTEE WORKPLAN**

- 16.1 The Committee discussed the work plan in detail and agreed the following items be included for consideration:
- Ofsted Inspection Report and outcomes, subject to going Council primarily, potentially this could be an extraordinary meeting
  - Children's Services IT (LiquidLogic)
  - Interdependence and the importance of partnership working
  - Exclusion Data Set figures and restorative practice, it was agreed that the RSC be invited to a meeting, once the latest data set had been published in July.

*Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting*

- LGA Training events
- NSPCC Training (Caspar newsletter)

16.2 Members were reminded to submit questions on the standing items, three days in advance of the committee meeting.

16.3 The Committee were reminded it was important to remember the “So What” question and to always ask “How do we know if were making a difference”. It was recognised the Ofsted report would inform the Committee’s priorities and additional items may be added to the work plan at a later point

16.4 Officers were reminded to include the Young Ambassadors on their list of statutory consultees for strategies.

### **CHAIRPERSON**

Meeting concluded at 1.21 pm