

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 22 April 2022 commencing at 10.00 am at the Virtual Meeting - Web ex meeting.

PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:

Cllr David Drew	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Cllr Ben Evans (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Cllr Nick Housden	Cllr Emma Nelson
Cllr Beki Hoyland	Ambassadors for Vulnerable Children & Young People

Officers present: Chris Spencer (Director of Children's Services), Kirsten Harrison (Director of Education), Ann James (Director of Children's Safeguarding & Care) and Andrea Griffiths.

Apologies: Charlotte Blanch and Cllr Linda Cohen

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

Councillor Beki Hoyland declared she was a mentor for 'Breathe'.

Councillor Nick Housden declared he was a Director of Bridge Youth Services.

18. OFSTED INSPECTION : OUTCOME REPORT

18.1 The Director of Children's Services (DCS) presented the report and continued to explain the inspection process in detail. Ofsted Inspector's had recognised the preparation and commended Officers on the production of requested information within twelve hours of the initial request. The DCS recognised the Authority still had work to do to achieve a good rating.

18.2 Members were advised that the service was a whisker away from achieving good for leadership and management of its social work practice and staff should be congratulated on their efforts. The Committee felt if the Inspection had taken place last summer, when the number of vacancies was at a low, and the service was more stable, the situation could have been even more positive. However, in the current climate there were a greater percentage of agency staff due to the market conditions which has slowed the rate of improvement a little.

- 18.3 The DCS recognised the Authority had come a considerable way since the initial report in 2017, he remarked that the situation was more dire than initially reported as the service had been allowed to drift for some time following the last inspection. In order to overcome these difficulties when the DCS was appointed in 2018, he had invested in a strong leadership team who had a collective approach to improve children services. A long and difficult journey had been embarked upon, which had been further compounded by the pandemic.
- 18.4 It was noted the Inspection Team felt significant progress had been made and this was acknowledged within their report, most importantly they recognised that children in Gloucestershire were no longer at risk of harm.
- 18.5 Members were advised that based on the report, Ofsted believed the Authority knew its strengths and weaknesses and recognised plans were in place to overcome the weaknesses. In an effort to overcome the challenges a clear model of practice was evolving.
- 18.6 In terms of what areas needed further improvement, members noted that the quality of accommodation for young people was an area of concern. The DCS felt the accommodation should be suitable for our own children and the same standards should be applied for a young person in care.
- 18.7 The Committee were informed that due to the legacy of poor practice in the past older Children and young people in the system had received a poor service which has implications for current challenges which young people are facing. Officer's recognised there were some improvements to be made to the Care Leavers Service.
- 18.8 The DCS explained one of the main issues faced by frontline staff was the aged IT infrastructure and proves to be a constant source of frustration as work was often lost due to system issues and had to be inputted all over again.
- 18.9 Members were pleased to note that Ofsted complimented the Social Workers and the practices used were regarded as a positive trajectory. As such, staff now felt more positive to work for Gloucestershire County Council as there were opportunities for career progression.
- 18.10 In essence, members felt the report narrative was positive and detailed but realised it was a journey and it would take time to achieve an overall good rating. The DCS reminded the committee of where the service had come from to its current position. He highlighted that the service had come along way and this was the springboard to the improvement journey to good.
- 18.11 The Chair highlighted the point that the Authority had moved from inadequate to requires improvement, he felt this was a fantastic position for the service to be in and thanked the DCS and his team for all their efforts. He also wished to recognise the work and efforts of the current and previous Cabinet Members and the supporting councillors, past and present, who had gone over and above to get the service to this point.

- 18.12 The Chair also wished to extend his personal thanks to the Young Ambassadors and the foster parents who had also played a valuable part in the journey.
- 18.13 In response to a question, members were advised that the Ofsted reporting framework had changed since 2017 and it was now more rigorous. It was recognised the Inspectors were very skilled and practiced at homing in on the service issues and they undertook considerable research before the visit. Members were advised to read the report in conjunction with the self-assessment. Officers were reassured by the forensic process that had been undertaken.
- 18.14 Members were amazed by the amount of work that had been undertaken to get to this point and they acknowledged what had gone before. The Committee felt there were a wide variety of areas that needed due consideration as part of the committee's future work plan.
- 18.15 In response to a question, it was explained that the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) had many overlaps within the various service areas and it played an important part in the continued improvement journey, therefore it was necessary to produce an action plan in response to the report findings. The DCS explained that a new Continuous Improvement Plan would replace the AIP, as it needed to be refreshed and refocused.
- 18.16 Members wondered what the position was for Ukrainian families and foreign students. The Director of Safeguarding and care explained that an update would be provided by public Health in relation to Ukrainian families as those arrangements were ongoing. In terms of foreign students, there were private fostering arrangements if the placements exceeded 28 days and the service were looking at the resources available. Members requested an overview of who the teams were within the directorate. (Action – Ann James)
- 18.17 The Director of Education (DoE) explained that language support as provided by GARAS was in place for Ukrainian families and refugees. Members were advised that many Ukrainian refugees spoke English and were undertaking online learning but that depended on their age. Host families also had access to support and guidance. It was noted that a briefing would be provided to members in due course.
- 18.18 The Committee recognised the efforts of the team and wished to congratulate them on their efforts. The DCS appreciated the sentiment and he felt it would help to boost morale.
- 18.19 In response to a question, members were advised that Ofsted randomly selected twelve case files and scrutinised them closely. Overall during the course of the inspection however Ofsted inspectors will have scrutinised something in the region of 200 children's files. Officers could suggest other files if they felt there were better examples of practice available. It was noted the current framework used by Ofsted was more strength based and they had the right to roam if they wished too.

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- 18.20 The Committee were surprised to learn that the various services were working within excess of 5,000 families who all required different levels of care and support, members felt this helped to put things into perspective.
- 18.21 The DCS advised the Committee that the report had been circulated to all staff within the directorate and a webinar had taken place and was attended by over 450 members of staff. The report findings had been shared and celebrated, which help to lift morale. It was noted that media coverage was relatively low key given it was a good news story.
- 18.22 The Young Ambassador (YA) advised the committee that young care leavers accommodation sometimes felt unsafe and the locations weren't always desirable. They felt the individual's circumstances needed to be considered before a placement was made. The DCS recognised there were always improvements to be made but to get a consistent approach that would be a challenge. It was noted that the young ambassadors were due to present to the district councils on the issue of living arrangements in relation to damp, unsafe flats, etc. Members noted there were issues surrounding tenancy agreements and they felt there was a lot more work to be undertaken in this area on a number of levels. The DCS recognised accommodation for care leavers was a key issue.
- 18.23 The Director of Children's Safeguarding and Care explained that housing was delivered on an eligibility basis and it would be necessary to swim against the tide to deliver suitable accommodation beyond the social housing policy.
- 18.24 It was requested that the report and its findings be distributed to the YA's, in an effort to share with the actual service users and gain their view. Members recognised that a communications plan was required to disseminate the report findings correctly to those who were impacted greatest by the service.
- 18.25 The Committee referred to the report which noted the IT systems and failures. In response to a question the DCS advised the Committee that the IT infrastructure had not been well maintained by the previous service provider and on occasion it had not been compatible with the service needs. Staff had become increasingly frustrated with the system and the need to replace the system was evident. Members noted that officers were considering Liquid Logic hosting the system, as it was currently being used by other Local Authorities quite successfully. It was recognised that IT was a major barrier to improvement and this area need to be dealt with as a priority going forward and would be detailed in the Continuous Improvement Plan.
- 18.26 Officers appreciated the need for an IT programme to deliver and develop an enhanced practice, to work collectively with partnerships to deliver the continued improvements.
- 18.27 In response to a question, it was explained that social services staff had continued to work in a face to face environment throughout the lockdown period and this had been recognised and commended by the Ofsted Team. Members were advised that staff had been based in the office throughout and it was important for staff to be

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able to discuss and share experiences. The DCS explained that many staff were beginning to return to the office, however this was being done on a rota basis as the Council had removed desks from many of the offices as part of their agile working policy.

18.28 The Director of Education explained the concept of agile working had received a mixed understanding but it was now moving in the right direction. It was recognised that life had moved on and there was now a new way of working which required a new balance.

18.29 The Committee proceeded to discuss the role of the Improvement Board and the need to progress the journey and the structure required for continued improvement. The Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years that there would be an Improvement Board but the new board would involve greater multi-agency and cross party working and would remain separate to the scrutiny committee function. Members welcomed this approach and look forward to an update in due course.

18.30 The Committee reiterated that it wished to convey its congratulations and thanks to all staff involved in the service area, they hoped officer's felt empowered to continue to deliver the service, as their efforts had not gone unrecognised.

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 11.45 am

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