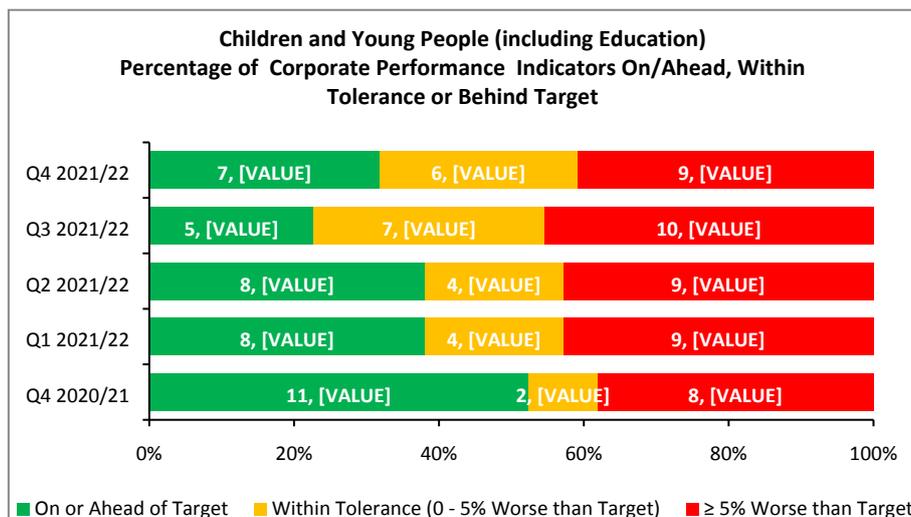


Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Performance Report Quarter 4 2021/22



1. During Quarter 4, Children's Services underwent re-inspection by Ofsted, the findings of which were published on 1st April. The judgement of the service is *Requires Improvement to be Good*. Ofsted stated that:

"Significant progress has been made in many areas of Gloucestershire's children's services since the last inspection in 2017, when the local authority was judged to be inadequate overall. However, services for children are not consistently good. Beginning from a very low base, there has been a relentless drive for improvement by both senior leaders and staff. This, along with significant financial investment and the backing of political leaders, has led to improved services that are now more effective in meeting the needs of children and families. As a result of these improvements to services and support for children, they are now better protected...Despite these improvements, there remains more to do to ensure that all children benefit from improved services."

Churn within the workforce and levels of demand have increased throughout 2021/22, contributing to a very challenging operating environment. Turnover within Children's Services has followed an increasing trend over the last year rising from a low of 10% in March 2021 to 13.6%, which is the highest level of turnover in more than two years. This is similar to the level of turnover being seen across the County Council (13.3%). Turnover of Children's Social Workers is particularly high, increasing for six successive quarters from 11.2% to 24.8% (includes newly qualified Social Workers, Social Workers and Senior Social Workers but excludes Agency workers).

The action taken by Children's Services leadership and Corporate colleagues in Quarter 3 led to some improvement in workforce capacity and stability in Quarter 4. The proportion of Social Workers with a caseload level in line with our target of 18 children or fewer improved from 60.4% to 66.1% in Quarter 4, with 87% of workers holding 22 children or fewer. Stability of Social worker also remains steady with 84% of children having fewer than 3 Social Workers in 6 months. That said, the situation remains extremely challenging and an enduring risk to achieving the goal of delivering consistently good services. Sickness due to Covid was certainly a factor over the course of Quarter 4. The risk relating to *insufficient workforce capacity and/or instability adversely impacting on pace and sustainability of improvement and contributing to discontinuity in social engagement with children and families* therefore **remains rated as Moderate (12)**.

Children's Services have a low level of appraisals completed with their staff (25.4% against a target of 85%). There are plans to improve this performance during 2022/23.

2. Case supervision should take place routinely and is a critical area of work to support progress and risk management for children, as well as to provide practice guidance to Social Workers. Three-quarters of children had a timely case supervision at the end of March (75.7% against a target of 95%). Performance reduced for the third quarter from 84% at the end of Quarter 1.
3. The Accelerated Improvement Plan, Quality Assurance and Performance Management, Team Improvement Programme and Essentials 2.0/3.0 arrangements continue to provide the framework for Children's Services improvement journey. Although the operational landscape remains challenging, there have been some improvements in key indicators and quality of practice through Quality Assurance during Quarter 4. 59% of Children's Services corporate performance measures were better than or within tolerance of target; this is the highest performance in 12 months. 92% of case audits judged Social Care practice as Requires Improvement (RI) or better. Performance again represents a 12-month high. However, caution should be exercised around performance in Quarter 4 as there was a significant reduction in the number of audits undertaken (74 compared with 130 in Quarter 3) due to resources being diverted during the Ofsted inspection. In addition, fewer audits were rated as Good or Outstanding than at the same time last year (38% compared with 45%).
4. We have also seen the proportion of workers with outlier performance for children (children experiencing significant drift and delay) rise from 4% to 16% between March 2021 and March 2022. These issues are a concern and will prove a challenge in moving the service towards Good.
5. Children's Services was removed from the Inadequate category under the ILACS framework following inspection in Quarter 4. Ofsted reported that "Children are no longer left in situations where they are known to be at immediate risk of significant harm without appropriate action being taken, nor are there any serious or widespread failures in the services provided to children." The risk relating to Ineffective social care practice, management oversight and review processes resulting in drift and delay for children and young people in situations of harm has therefore reduced from Moderate (8) to Low (6).
6. At the end of March, the number of children open to Social Care was at its highest level recorded to date, with almost 4,600 children undergoing assessment or receiving support, protection of care. This is 12% higher than the 2019/20 average.
7. Contact demand increased in Quarter 4 with the highest level of contacts received to date in March (just over 8,750). During 2021/22, average monthly contacts have increased by one-third compared to 2019/20 (up 32%). Timeliness of decisions reduced throughout 2021/22 from 88.2% in Quarter 1 to 70.6% in Quarter 4, with performance worse than target (90%).

Quarter 4 also saw an increasing number of referrals (just over 2,500, with more than 1,000 of these received in March alone). This is an increase of 6% in average monthly referrals to Social Care in 2021/22 compared with 2019/20.

Timeliness of initial visits has followed a declining trend over the last two years, reducing from 87.7% in Quarter 4 2019/20 to 65.3% in Quarter 4 2021/22 (against a target of 85%).

Decision making for contacts rated as Red and timeliness of initial visits to those children progressing under Section 47 both improved in Quarter 4 (from 78% to 83% and 62% to 73% respectively). However, performance remains worse than target (90% and 85% respectively).

8. The proportion of repeat referrals increased slightly in Quarter 4 to 25.5% against a higher number of referrals overall. This is worse than target (22.5%) and the peer group average (21.3%, Mar-21).

9. Assessment timeliness declined for the second quarter and was at the lowest level since December 2019 (77.4%). This is worse than target and the peer group average (87%). However, this was impacted by particularly low performance in January (72%). Performance improved month on month to 82% in March. A growing number of ongoing assessments have been open for more than 60 working days, up from 16 children at the end of Quarter 1 to 79 at the end of Quarter 4.

Just under three-quarters of initial child protection conferences were timely in Quarter 4 (72%). This is a significant decline compared with performance during Quarter 1 of the financial year (89%) and represents a 12-month low. Timeliness is worse than the peer group average (86.7% Mar-21).

10. We continue to visit the majority of children and young people open to Social Care in a timely way, however, visiting for our younger care leavers has been off target for more than a year (71% at the end of Quarter 4). Improvement is also needed in the timeliness of visiting children subject to a protection plan which was worse than target at the end of Quarter 4 (85% versus a target of 93%). We also need to see more of our children subject to a protection plan alone within timescale (83% against a target of 95%).
11. The number of children subject to a protection plan remained high at the end of March (855 children); this is the highest level since December 2018. Repeat protection planning has been worse than target throughout 2021/22. Almost one-third of children made subject to a plan in Quarter 4 had had one or more previous plans (29.5%). Performance remains worse than target (25%) and our peer comparators (23.8% Mar-21). Practice needs to improve to make a sustained difference for children.
12. The number of children in care remained high but steady during Quarter 4, with 841 children in care at the end of March. This compares to an average of 778 children in 2020/21 and 727 in 2019/20. This continues to place strain on the availability of suitable placements for children and our ability to place children within County (75.1%). Nevertheless, our performance on minimising the number of children placed out of county, more than 20 miles from home compares well with comparators (20.3% against a peer group average of 22.9%).
13. The proportion of repeat admissions to care increased for the second quarter (10.3% up from 3.4% in Quarter 2). During 2021/22, readmissions to care account for 7% of admissions to care overall; performance remains better than target and national levels (11.4%).
14. One in five children (20.3%) are accommodated in care under a Section 20 agreement. Performance is marginally worse than the stretch target implemented at the beginning of last quarter. We continue to have higher than national levels of children accommodated under a Section 20 agreement (15%).
15. Overall, 68% of children in our care are looked after by in-house Foster Carers (up from 64% last quarter). The vast majority of our available in-house foster care capacity is utilised (96.2%).
16. For the second quarter, there was an improvement in the number of children in care having 3 or more placements within a 12-month period, down from 16.2% in Quarter 2 to 12.5%. This is better than target for the first time in three years. However, we continue to see a higher proportion of our children in care experiencing short-term placement instability than the peer group average (9.5%).

Long-term placement stability performance remained similar to last quarter and is within tolerance of the stretch target implemented at the start of Quarter 3 (65.9% against a target of 68%) but is worse than the peer group average (70%, Mar-21).

Alongside growth in the number of children in care, there remain significant challenges in the provider market due to Covid. The Sufficiency Strategy continues to provide the focal point for our work and is currently being refreshed. The next stage in developing capacity with provider partners is also commencing. The risk relating to *failure to develop sufficient placement capacity to meet the needs of looked after children* remains rated as moderate (12).

17. At the end of 2021/22, reviews were timely for all children in care; performance has declined slightly over the last three quarters but continues to be within tolerance of target (97.2%).
18. Performance for our younger care leavers has been a concern throughout 2021/22, with under performance in terms of contact and visiting, pathway planning, suitable living arrangements and opportunities for education, employment and training (EET). This is a very different picture from our 19-21 year old and over 21 year old care leavers for whom all areas of performance have been within tolerance or better than target, with the exception of EET opportunities. However, at the end of March, there had been an improvement for 16-18 year olds who had had contact with their Social Worker in the last 6 months and who were living in suitable accommodation. Performance moved within tolerance of the target for the first time in more than 12 months. The Ofsted inspection highlighted that Personal Assistants are not being allocated to Care Leavers quickly enough and this is impacting performance. This is an area of focus for improvement.
19. Based on information provided by schools to the DfE, we know that average attendance of pupils across Gloucestershire was 89.5% during Quarter 4. Attendance was lower for those pupils with a Social Worker (82.2%).

In Quarter 4, almost a quarter of our school aged children in care, were classified as persistently absent (an attendance rate of less than 90% of school days) (23.9%). Illness accounted for 6.7% of persistent absence.

20. Since September 2021, Ofsted have returned to inspecting schools under a new more rigorous framework which may mean that schools find it more challenging to hold onto to previously Good or Outstanding judgements. Changes introduced in September 2021 reintroduced inspections for schools previously judged as Outstanding. There has been quite a high frequency of inspections in Gloucestershire since resumption in September (47 inspections, 15 awaiting judgement).

Based on final reports that have been published, the majority of settings achieved a Good rating (22), while 9 settings Require Improvement and 1 was judged to be Inadequate.

The proportion of children attending Good or Outstanding Early Years settings has increased marginally from 90.9% to 91.9%, while children attending Good or Outstanding Secondary settings has increased from 85% to 91%. Children attending Good or Outstanding Primary setting has seen a small decline from 87% to 86%. Performance is within tolerance of target for Early Years and Primary settings and better than target for Secondary school settings.

We aim to ensure that our children in care are educated in a Good or Outstanding settings to reduce educational learning gaps. Just under three-quarters of our school-aged children in care educated in Gloucestershire have a school place in a Good or Outstanding school (73.9%), while 9.4% of pupils attend a school rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate. 16.7% of children attend a new academy school which hasn't received its first Ofsted inspection as yet, so it is unclear what level of education standard they are receiving.

21. There continues to be unprecedented demand for EHCP Assessments. In 2020/21, requests for assessment rose by 18% compared to the previous academic year (820 compared with 695). By the end of March 2022, we had received 30% more requests for assessment than during the same period in 2020/21 (574 compared with 441).

As a result of the high level of demand, a significant decrease in the timeliness of issuing EHC plans has been seen since the start of the pandemic with performance declining from 85.2% (incl. exceptions) in the 2019/20 academic year to 34.3% in 2020/21. One-off additional resource has been put in place to support temporary staffing capacity and interim changes of priority work and practice have been made to address the backlog of required assessments.

Funding has also been provided to the service and active recruitment is taking place to fill long term posts to increase the overall service capacity to manage the growth during 2022/23. If the growth continues at the rate that we are currently seeing, funding and staffing capacity will need to remain under review. We have been invited to become part of a DfE 'SEND Best Value' project' which will provide expertise and resource to address systemic issues in the longer term.

Although a continued decline in timeliness of issuing EHC plans has been seen in the 2021/22 academic year to date (13.7%), early indications are reported by the service that these remedial actions are starting to have an impact. Whilst the focus is on issuing plans in timescale, this is alongside issuing plans when all relevant assessments are completed, many of these will be outside of timescales whilst the backlog is cleared, and the managing of demand is reviewed. This will affect the overall timeliness performance as more plans are issued that are already out of timescale. Over the coming months this will be closely monitored by the service.

So far this academic year, more EHCPs have been issued than at the same time last academic year (386 compared with 355, up 9%). A continued growth in the number of children with EHCPs is expected as the service works through assessment requests. This will have a significant impact on the high needs budget.

4,925 children and young people had an Education Health and Care plan (EHCP) at the end of March. This equates to a rate of 28.0 per 1,000 population and represents an increasing trend. This reflects the national trend where the number of children and young people with statements or EHCPs has increased year on year for the last decade. Gloucestershire's rate is now in line with our peer group average (28.0).

The SEND green paper published in March supports the planned actions and priorities set out in short term targeted improvement plans linked to increasing temporary staffing capacity from one-off resource, as well as the medium and longer-term strategic changes. The refreshed SEND strategy and Inclusion Strategy are in their system engagement phase. Focused task and finish groups around the Local Area SEND Inspection and Special School place planning have been established around the SEND and Inclusion teams with Social Care and Health engagement to target and steer transformation work to mitigate medium and long-term risks to children with SEND. The Principal Education Psychologist comes into post in late April to lead the Education Psychology and ATS transformation of services alongside the transformation of the EHCP casework team structure. Based on the proactive work taking place, the increased one-off investment and national focus on this area the risk relating to *failure to close the gaps in educational outcomes for vulnerable learners and their peers resulting in adverse impacts for children and families, increased cost/pressures on specialist provision and damage to reputation* has **reduced from High (16) to Moderate (9)**.

22. This academic year to date, there have been 82 permanent exclusions (of which 41 were in Quarter 4). This is up from 70 children at the same time in the 2019/20 academic year and similar to the same time in the 2018/19 Academic Year which was prior to the pandemic (85 children).

The majority of permanent exclusions have been among Secondary school pupils, (52 children). This is, however, a reduction compared to the same time in the 18/19 academic year (72 children). Conversely the number of permanent exclusions of Primary School children has doubled when compared to the same time period, with 26 Primary school exclusions in the 2021/22 Academic Year to date compared with 12 children at the same time in the 2018/19 Academic Year.

Half of the Primary school children permanently excluded this academic year to date had an EHCP (13 children) the majority of which had a primary need of Social, Emotional, Mental Health (SEMH). Only 2 children permanently excluded from Secondary school had an EHCP. Further analysis is being undertaken to build up a profile of children most likely to experience exclusion. This will support the service in their work with schools to consider what further support might be needed to prevent exclusions for these children.

Since the start of the new academic year students and staff have had to readjust and return to 'as normal' arrangements insofar as possible whilst also continuing to provide education during periods of absence for both students and staff. The increase in demand for EHCP assessments resulting in delay against statutory timescales may also mean there are children not yet receiving the full support they require to engage with school and access the curriculum. Primary schools have been particularly impacted, with staff absence has included that of the additional adult support required for SEN pupils. Schools are also reporting an increase in dis-regulation: the high level of staff absence has resulted in some Head Teachers having to focus on teaching which reduces the amount of capacity available to de-escalate incidents which may prevent a child being permanently excluded.

Whilst permanent exclusions due to persistent disruptive behaviour remains the most common reason for permanent exclusion, this has reduced from 49% in the 2019/20 academic year to 42% this academic year. Permanent exclusions for physical assault against an adult or pupil have increased from 36% to 43% over the same period.