

REPORT TITLE: Ofsted Inspection of Gloucestershire Children’s Services and Improvement Plan

Cabinet Date	22 nd June 2022
Cabinet Member	Cllr Stephen Davies, Cabinet Member for Children’s Safeguarding and Early Years
Key Decision	Yes
Purpose of Report	To seek Cabinet approval for the Improvement Plan developed in response to the inspection of GCC Children’s Services (published 1 st April 2022), prior to its submission to Ofsted.
Recommendations	<p>That Cabinet:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notes the Ofsted Inspection report (1st April 2022), attached at Appendix 1. • Approves the Children’s Services Improvement Plan at Appendix 2, and; • Delegates authority to the Director of Children’s Services to make any final changes to the Improvement Plan, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children’s Safeguarding and Early Years, prior to its submission to Ofsted.
Reasons for Recommendations	GCC’s Children’s Services were subject to inspection by Ofsted between 7 th February 2022 and 18 th February 2022, with the final report published on 1 st April 2022. Ofsted judged the overall effectiveness of services as ‘Requires improvement to be good.’ Therefore, the local authority is required to submit an improvement plan to address the recommendations made in the published report to Ofsted by 15 July.
Resource Implications	The actions within the Improvement Plan will be delivered within existing council resources and budgets.
Background Documents	Report of Inspection of Gloucestershire’s local authority children’s services https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50180552
Statutory Authority	Children Act 2004

Divisional Councillor(s)	All
Officer	Andy Dempsey Director of Partnerships and Strategy E-mail: andy.dempsey@gloucestershire.gov.uk Telephone: (01452) 425019
Timeline	The Improvement Plan is required to be submitted to Ofsted by 15 July.

Background

- 1.0** Gloucestershire's Children's Services were inspected by Ofsted in 2017, when services were judged to be inadequate overall. Consequently, Children's Services were subject to a statutory direction by the Secretary of State and oversight by a multi-agency Improvement Board (IB), working under an independent chair. The role of the Improvement Board, which comprised GCC councillors and senior officers, local partners and DfE representatives, was to oversee improvement activity, with a particular focus on the recommendations made by Ofsted.
- 2.0** Alongside the work of the Improvement Board, which convened on a 6-week cycle, Ofsted also undertook periodic monitoring visits, usually comprising two HM Inspectors, to assess progress. Monitoring visits tended to look in detail at discrete aspects of practice, combining interviews with practitioners and review of a sample of associated case records. The Department for Education also undertook their own reviews on a six-monthly basis, taking a more holistic view of progress.
- 3.0** The cycle of regulatory inspection is such that a local authority can usually anticipate inspection of its Children's Services on a more or less 3-year cycle. The commencement of the pandemic in March 2020 had a significant impact on the inspection cycle both locally and nationally. In total, Gloucestershire Children's Services received 7 monitoring visits over the period January 2018 and February 2020. In October 2020, Ofsted undertook a Focussed Visit, which is more akin to a mini inspection, involving a much larger team of five inspectors. The resulting letter noted that 'the improvement journey had not been straightforward' but also that there had been 'a noticeable change of pace over recent months.'
- 4.0** Following the Focussed Visit, full inspection was anticipated imminently, however, this was impacted by the second national lockdown, creating further delay and uncertainty for services. There is no doubt that for services judged inadequate in such a public manner, staff recruitment, retention and morale are all adversely affected, within the context of an already strained workforce market and challenging operational landscape.
- 5.0** Full inspection finally took place in February 2022, almost exactly 5 years after the 2017 inspection, with the report published on 1st April 2022. Ofsted concluded that the overall effectiveness of services was no longer inadequate and had improved to 'Requires improvement to be Good.' A copy of the report is attached at Appendix 1.
- 6.0** The report makes judgements on 3 aspects of practice, each of which is graded, contributing to the overall judgement as set out below:

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

- 6.0** The report makes 5 recommendations for further improvement, as set out below:
- The timeliness and application of consistent thresholds for child protection strategy meetings.
 - The suitability of accommodation for care leavers to meet their needs, including to feel safe.
 - The quality of case supervision and management.
 - The timeliness with which personal advisers are allocated to children, to best support their transition and adulthood.
 - How well IT systems support social workers to do their jobs.
- 7.0** Within their report, Ofsted note the significant progress made in ‘many areas of Gloucestershire’s children’s services since the last inspection in 2017 and that ‘from a very low base, there has been a relentless drive for improvement by both senior leaders and staff’. The report also notes that ‘services for children are not consistently good’ and ‘there remains more to do to ensure that all children benefit from improved services.’
- 8.0** Throughout the inspection, the Ofsted team noted that Children’s Services senior leadership understood their strengths and weaknesses, as set out within their self-evaluation, and articulated by the Director of Children’s Services at the commencement of inspection. This was significant given the serious questions raised in the 2017 inspection about the veracity, integrity and accuracy of data provided to Ofsted. The quality assurance and performance management arrangements now in place provide senior leaders with a good understanding of the quality and impact of practice, with the appropriate use of meaningful external comparators to further support self-awareness.
- 9.0** The next stages for Children’s Services are first, to consolidate our position so there is no return to inadequate standards; and second to progress from an overall position of ‘requires improvement’ to that of ‘good’. As such, the Improvement Plan (IP) attached at Appendix 2 looks beyond the immediate recommendations set out within the Ofsted Inspection Report to articulate a broader set of actions, reflecting the deeper appreciation of service effectiveness by Children’s Services senior leadership around what needs to improve to deliver sustainably good services.
- 10.0** The IP, once approved, will be subject to regular oversight and review by GCC Senior and Corporate Leadership, Elected Members and a reconstituted, multi-agency Improvement Board. While no longer under a Statutory Direction, Children’s Services will remain in a Department for Education (DfE) category of ‘support and supervision’ for at least the next 12 months.
- 11.0** Children’s Services do not fail in isolation, neither do they succeed. Ofsted noted that the ‘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.’ This investment has reduced caseloads, enabled the development of the Social Work Academy and ensured our recruitment and retention offer has remained competitive within a very challenging marketplace.

- 12.0** The support and input of partners through the IB, Children's Safeguarding Partnership and Children's Wellbeing Coalition has also helped to foster a shared appreciation of the needs, risks and circumstances of children and young people in the county, as the basis for shared vision for their safeguarding and future development. This positive corporate and partner engagement will need to be sustained as we respond to the significant and enduring impacts of Covid and the emerging cost of living pressures impacting on families, while simultaneously improving practice. Developing and embedding these arrangements, utilising the greater autonomy that flows from the removal of the statutory direction, will provide a necessary bulwark against the cycle of marginal improvement and regression that has been characteristic of Gloucestershire's past.
- 13.0** Alongside the IB, Children's Services have adopted Systemic Social Work as its model of practice and commenced a transformation programme, to ensure its organisational form and working arrangements enable practice to flourish and meet the challenges of 21st Century social work. At a national level, there are several major policy initiatives which children's services and local partners will have to respond including the Early Years Healthy Development Review Report: Best Start in Life, Independent Review of Children's Social Care: The Case for Change, Education White Paper and SEND Reforms.
- 14.0** Taken account of the evolving policy context and challenging operating landscape, remaining at the 'requires improvement to be good' level will require sustained focus and effort, with no let-up. The journey to good will be as challenging, if not more so, than that required to move services out of the inadequate category and require a similar degree of focus at service, corporate and partnership levels. A Joint Area Targeted Inspection (JTAI) focussed on a particular area of practice can also be anticipated in the next 12 - 18 months.

Options

- 15.0** Gloucestershire's Children's Services are required to submit an improvement plan to Ofsted by 15 July.

Risks

- 16.0** There are several risks identified:

- 1. Risk:** The Improvement Plan is not effective in improving services without outcomes for children and young people underperforming. **Mitigation** The Improvement Plan will continue to be subject to oversight and input from corporate colleagues and local partners, including a reconstituted Improvement Board.
- 2. Risk:** That infrastructure and resourcing is insufficient to service need. **Mitigation:** There is a continued commitment to the investment and infrastructure development necessary to further improve services.

Financial implications

17.0 There are no direct financial implications arising from this decision, however, Children's Services continues to face considerable challenges in this area, particularly in relation to staffing, the cost and availability of placements and special educational needs.

Climate change implications

18.0 Meetings will be conducted on a virtual basis whenever appropriate in order to limit travel. When travel for visits, multi-agency meetings or inspections is required this will be sustainable and smart using efficient route mapping and with fuel conservation in mind, whenever petrol or diesel vehicles are used. Electric vehicles, from the Council pool, to be used where possible.

Equality implications

19.0 Has an Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) been completed? Yes

Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) implications

20.0 There are no direct Data Protection Impact Assessment implications arising from the Ofsted Report.

Social value implications

21.0 Ensuring that children and families receive the right service at the right time to ensure children are safeguarded, whilst avoiding unnecessary intrusion in their lives, is key to the next stage of our improvement journey. This is the essence of the improvement and transformation activity that will take place over coming months and years. Taking this approach will deliver considerable social value through better outcomes for children and the wider community of Gloucestershire.

Consultation feedback

22.0 The Improvement Plan (IP) attached at Appendix 2 has been developed by Children's Services senior leadership in response to the inspection findings. It will be subject to ongoing consultation with partners and stakeholders prior to submission to ensure it is as exhaustive as practicable and enjoys widespread support.

Officer recommendations

23.0 Ofsted published its Inspection Report for Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) Children's Services on 1st April 2022, a copy of which is attached at Appendix 1. An Improvement Plan responding to its findings is required to be submitted to Ofsted by 15 July.

24.0 The Improvement Plan attached at Appendix 2 builds on the approach that has successfully moved services out of the inadequate category and provides a sound basis to achieve sustainably good service provision in future . It is recommended that Cabinet approves the plan and gives delegated authority to the Director of Children's Services to make any final changes to the Improvement Plan, in consultation with the Lead Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years, prior to its submission to Ofsted.

Performance management/follow-up

25.0 Children's Services has a comprehensive performance and quality assurance framework, which Ofsted acknowledge, has provided service and corporate leadership with a comprehensive insight into the effectiveness of practice. These arrangements will continue to evolve as part of transformation and improvement activity, with performance and quality assurance overseen by senior and corporate leadership and a reconstituted Improvement Board.