

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 24 November 2022 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:

Cllr Linda Cohen	Cllr Beki Hoyland
Cllr David Drew	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Cllr Ben Evans (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Cllr Tim Harman	Cllr Emma Nelson
Cllr Stephen Hirst	

Substitutes:

Apologies: Charlotte Blanch, Lyn Green and Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People

In attendance: Chris Spencer, Director of Children's Services
Cllr Stephen Davies, Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years
Cllr Philip Robinson, Cabinet Member for Educations, Skills and Bus Transport
Dave Jones, Business Manager for the Executive Safeguarding Support Unit
Karl Grocock, Assistant Director of Digital and ICT
Andrea Griffiths, Senior Democratic Services Adviser
Laura Powick, Democratic Services Adviser

Attendance via video

conference: Steve Mawson, Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director for Corporate Resources
Kirsten Harrison, Director of Education

46. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Charlotte Blanch (Clifton Diocese) and the Ambassadors for Vulnerable Children and Young People.

47. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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Cllr Andrew Miller declared an interest as a foster carer for Gloucestershire County Council (GCC).

Cllr Beki Hoyland declared an interest as a mentor for the Young Girls Project.

48. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 September 2022 were approved.

49. ANNUAL SAFEGUARDING REPORT

Chris Spencer, Director of Children's Services, introduced the Annual Safeguarding Report, which provided an overview of the progress made by the Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership (GSCP) between April 2021 and March 2022 under Working Together 2018.

Attention was drawn to the list of national guidance and publications included in the report which had influenced the work of the GSCP, including the Allan Wood Review and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

Members noted that the Executive of the GSCP comprised of Marion Andrew Evans, representing the Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Craig Holden, representing Gloucestershire Constabulary, Chris Spencer, representing GCC, and Kirsten Harrison, representing schools.

It was understood that engagement with the GSCP across partners was strong, and that partners had invested significant funds to the Partnership.

Dave Jones, Business Manager for the Executive Safeguarding Support Unit, provided further details on the work of the GSCP, which included reviewing the role of the Business Manager; progressing multi-agency training and practice development, which was showing significant growth; developing a multi-agency Significant Incident Notification (SIN) Decision Procedure; reviewing the Section 175/157 Education Act Safeguarding Assurances audit; and improving the S11 Audit to include a young person's panel as part of the commitment to developing the voice of the child.

Members were advised that Mark Power had been appointed as the new Independent Scrutineer in April 2022.

It was recognised that the inclusion of the CCG, Constabulary and the Local Authority on the Executive of the GSCP improved knowledge across the Partnership and ensured a shared duty for safeguarding across partners. Additionally, there had been robust engagement across all partners in audits and activities undertaken by GSCP sub-groups.

The Committee was informed of the Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews and Child Death Reviews undertaken between April 2021 and March 2022.

One member queried how the GSCP worked alongside other partnerships in the south-west. In response, it was explained that since the Government had removed any fixed approach to running safeguarding partnerships in 2018, Gloucestershire was unique in the south-west by having a single geographical footprint for the CCG, the Constabulary and the Local Authority, which made direct comparisons with other areas difficult. However, business units across the south-west did liaise on safeguarding reviews, key themes and duties. Additionally, Gloucestershire liaised with colleagues nationally, such as by attending seminars on national themes.

There was a query relating to the difficulties of social care recruitment. In response, officers acknowledged the difficulties with recruitment in this area nationally. It was understood that 33 percent of social workers in Gloucestershire were agency staff. GCC had developed a number of incentives to improve recruitment in this area, including financial incentives, career progression opportunities and training offers.

It was also noted that Gloucestershire Constabulary commitment to the Partnership was currently unstable due to a shortage of staff. Additionally, the numbers of designated doctors and nurses were currently below the statutory limit.

It was noted that the Committee would be considering an item on the recruitment and retention of social workers at its meeting in January 2023.

One member queried whether the provision of online training was of the same quality as in-person training. They queried the disparity between the numbers of police and teachers undertaking training and whether this was a concern. They also asked whether officers were aware of a loophole in the DBS check system which allowed people who had changed their name by deed poll to get a clean DBS check.

In terms of the latter query, officers were aware of the loophole, and schools had been advised on the issue.

In response to the queries relating to training provision, Dave Jones explained that whilst the numbers of police officers completing training were not at the level expected, it would only be those whose roles related to safeguarding who would be expected to complete the training. Schools were able to buy into the Business Unit's traded service to provide training for school staff. It was understood that training was provided at different levels depending on the safeguarding requirements of the varying workforce that engaged with children. It was also understood that it was the responsibility of the employer to assess the impact of training and to identify any gaps that may need to be addressed.

It was noted, in response to a further query, that the schools who had bought into the training traded service had not failed an Ofsted inspection in terms of safeguarding, apart from one, which was as a result of poor decision making by the school's senior leadership.

It was confirmed, in response to a query, that the Gloucestershire Child Death Overview Panel Annual Report for 2021/22 was publically available. It was noted

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that all child deaths were reported to the GSCP to consider any safeguarding aspects. It was understood that this process for child death reviews enabled more general concerns to also be identified, for example in terms of road safety issues.

Following a further query, it was confirmed that business unit staff were not required to attend inquests.

Another member sought clarification on the process for rapid reviews and asked whether there was a significant difference in the number of reviews carried out between urban and rural areas of the County.

In response, Dave Jones explained that the majority of the GSCP's business was based in urban areas. The number of reviews being seen in rural areas were equating to expectations, however the Partnership relied on agencies working in those areas to communicate any safeguarding concerns. It was noted that officers were acutely aware of the vulnerabilities in rural parts of Gloucestershire, particularly areas of poverty within the Cotswolds.

One member raised a concern that almost half of care leavers were not in education, employment or training. Dave Jones responded that the Partnership worked with colleagues in relevant departments on this issue. The GSCP hoped to see these figures improve, and would be considered by sub-groups, depending on other workload priorities.

A further concern was raised by the member regarding the numbers of care leavers deemed to be living in unsuitable accommodation. In response, it was explained that this issue was a high priority for the Districts Safeguarding Sub-Group, which would be considering the data and talking to ambassadors about how to address the issue.

It was understood that the Committee would consider the results of this year's Bright Spots survey at their meeting in March 2023.

The Chair thanked officers for presenting the report to the Committee.

50. CHILDREN'S SERVICES IT UPDATE

Karl Grocock, Assistant Director of Digital and ICT, presented the update report on Children's Services ICT. The Committee had requested at their last meeting that a report be provided at this meeting to include specific and definite actions for Children's Services ICT.

Members were informed that feedback from staff in Children's Services was that ICT was improving and that systems were performing at an acceptable level, although there was still further work to be done.

Staff could access articles online about using ICT, and a pulse survey was planned for January for further feedback, followed by the establishment of more formal user groups.

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It was noted that improvements to the Council's network had now been completed across all sites, and that the continued rollout of Microsoft 365 would improve efficiency going forward. Liquidlogic had been upgraded to version 16, and it was planned for Liquidlogic to host the system for the Council in the future.

Improvements had been made in terms of the numbers of ICT incidents over the past three months. Improvements had also been made relating to the provision of new starter equipment.

Members were also advised that work towards a refreshed digital and ICT strategy 2023-2027 was ongoing. The road map for that strategy would be shared with Committee members for their information.

One member expressed their disappointment that the report did not include an action plan setting out the plans, expected outcomes and timescales for improvements to Children's Services ICT.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years explained that there was a more detailed plan that could be shared with the Committee. He added that he regularly met with senior officers to discuss the issue of Children's Service's ICT.

Chris Spencer also recognised the impact that ICT issues had on staff morale and was reassured that improvements had been delivered.

A query was asked regarding the rollout of the upgraded Liquidlogic system for staff. In response, Karl Grocock explained that the rollout had been delayed until early 2023 to avoid overloading staff with the changes to Liquidlogic at the same time as learning to use Microsoft 365.

One member asked what equipment new starters received and whether social workers had to write up their notes whilst out on visits. In response, it was explained that staff could record their notes using Bluetooth and then could download these following their visits when back in the office or at home.

The member queried whether staff had the ICT skills to be able to use ICT in this way. In response, officers acknowledged that staff had varying levels of ICT skills, however a range of training materials were available on Service Now.

Steve Mawson, Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director for Corporate Resources apologised that the ICT improvement plan had not been presented at this meeting. He highlighted, however, the potential duplication of work by this Committee considering the plan, as it was the responsibility of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee to scrutinise the full ICT improvement plan.

He added that social worker feedback had been positive in terms of the improvements made to ICT in Children's Services, and emphasised the importance of any issues being reported to ensure these could be addressed.

A further member raised their concern regarding the impact of ICT issues on the morale of social workers.

Karl Grocock provided assurance that progress was being made in ICT and that training needs were being picked up. He added that the planned pulse survey would provide further feedback which could be incorporated into the improvement plan.

In response to a query, reassurance was provided that Liquidlogic could still be effectively scrutinised despite the Council no longer hosting the system.

Following a discussion, it was agreed that ICT would consider developing bespoke ICT training sessions for social workers. Feedback on these would be provided to the Committee.

A further member expressed frustration that the report received had not contained specific details relating to the Children's Services ICT improvement plan, including timescales for outcomes, and explanations for any delays.

In response, members were advised that dates could not always be committed to, depending on the response required following testing.

The member responded that the action plan should include an allowance for dates to change in response to testing.

The Chair of the Committee proposed that he would speak to the Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding potential duplication of ICT scrutiny.

In response to a query relating to user groups, Karl Grocock explained that he would like to see each individual directorates with their own ICT user groups.

In response to a further query, it was understood that GCC was working alongside two other councils to develop a council user group for Liquidlogic. The Committee requested to receive feedback on this user group going forward.

It was requested that a further report on the Children's Services ICT Improvement Plan, including specific projects and timescales be presented at the next Committee meeting in January 2023.

51. CFSC WORK PLAN

At its next meeting on 12 January 2023, the Committee would receive, in addition to the regular update reports:

- a report on the Children's Services ICT Improvement Plan, including specific projects and timescales;
- a verbal update on the Trevone House investigation;
- a briefing note on the recommissioning of children and family centres;

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- a briefing paper on academies;
- an update on school attendance;
- a report on the Sufficiency Strategy; and
- an update on the recruitment and retention of Children's Services Staff.

The following items would be added to the agenda for the March 2023 meeting:

- a full report on the Trevone House investigation; and
- a report on models for early intervention.

The following items would be added to the agenda for the July 2023 meeting:

- a report looking into NEET care leavers and those not in suitable accommodation; and
- a report on further education, to include perspectives from further education principals.

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 12.30 pm