

CHILDREN and FAMILIES OVERVIEW and SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting Date:	12 th January 2023
Purpose of Report:	<p>To appraise Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee of progress made by Gloucestershire’s Continuous Improvement Board and delivery of the Continuous Improvement Plan since their launch in July 2022.</p> <p>The Continuous Improvement Plan includes specific actions in response to the five formal recommendations made by Ofsted in response to its full inspection of February 2022, when Children’s Services were judged to ‘Require Improvement to be Good’. The Plan includes a broader programme of improvement in support of the development and delivery of consistently good services.</p> <p>This report is one of a series of regular improvement update reports provided to Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Committee’s support and challenge in assessing the continued efficacy of the Continuous Improvement Board and Plan as we progress.</p>
Context:	<p>Background</p> <p>Gloucestershire’s Children’s Services were inspected by Ofsted in February 2022 and judged to be Requires Improvement to be Good. This ended an extended period of government intervention and special measures following the 2017 inspection which judged children’s services in the county to be Inadequate.</p> <p>The Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) cycle of regulatory inspection is such that a local authority should expect a full inspection at least every three years, with annual inspection activity in the intervening years being focused on a specific area of practice (Focused Visit) or of the safeguarding partnership (Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI)). It is therefore anticipated that our next inspection will be within the forthcoming year and will be in the form of a JTAI or focused visit. A SEND inspection is also anticipated within this timeframe.</p> <p>In addition to the above, each local authority must produce an annual evaluation of social work practice and undertake an Annual Conversation with Her Majesty’s Inspectors. Gloucestershire’s Annual Self-Evaluation of Social Work Practice was finalised in November 2022 and the Annual Conversation took place on 25th November 2022. The letter from this conversation is expected in the near future.</p>

Full Inspection findings

Gloucestershire's Inspection Report is published on the Ofsted website and sets out the inspection findings and grade given to the local authority in three areas of assessed impact. These contribute to the overall effectiveness 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

The report noted 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.' Ofsted made the following five recommendations for further improvement. These are addressed within the Continuous Improvement Plan:

- 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.

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.

Continuous Improvement

Our aim is to deliver 'Good' or better services to all children and families. Our priorities must therefore be to consolidate the strengths we have developed, to ensure these are evident for all children in touch with our service and then to create the conditions for purposeful social work and

innovation to help accelerate the pace of improvement despite the challenging times we face. As such, the Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP), approved by Cabinet in June 2022, looks beyond the immediate recommendations set out within the Ofsted Inspection Report to articulate a broader set of actions and impact measures, reflecting the deeper appreciation of service effectiveness by Children's Services senior leadership around what needs to improve to deliver sustainably good services.

Children's Services do not fail in isolation, neither do they succeed. Ofsted previously 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 had reduced caseloads, enabled the development of the Social Work Academy, and helped our recruitment and retention offer to remain competitive within a very challenging marketplace.

The support and input of partners through the Continual Improvement Board (CIB), Children's Safeguarding Partnership and Children's Wellbeing Coalition together with positive corporate and political engagement must be sustained if we are to respond to the significant and enduring impacts of Covid, the cost-of-living pressures on our most vulnerable families and funding pressures across the public sector, whilst simultaneously improving practice. The contextual challenges and their impact on progress cannot be overstated, as is evident in some of the key metrics underpinning the Plan. Whilst there are some indicators of the system stabilising (workforce and performance metrics) the number of children requiring a social work response and requiring our care has continued to grow.

Alongside the CIP and CIB, which had its most recent meeting on 11th November 2022, Children's Services have adopted Systemic Social Work as its model of practice and commenced a transformation programme aimed at ensuring its organisational form and working arrangements enable practice to flourish. At a national level, there are several major policy initiatives which children's services and local partners will have to respond to including the Early Years Healthy Development Review Report: Best Start in Lifeⁱ, the Independent Review of Children's Social Careⁱⁱ, Child Protection in England (the report of the National Panel into the deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes)ⁱⁱⁱ, the intentions of the now shelved Education White Paper^{iv} and the SEND Reforms^v.

The journey to good will be at least as challenging as that required to move services out of the inadequate category. We must ensure that all children who need our care and support receive a timely, skilled intervention, that managers eradicate drift and delay and that, when we exit the lives of children and families, we leave them equipped to sustain the changes they have made. This will require unrelenting focus at

service, corporate and partnership levels if we are to embed what's good, ensure all children receive a consistently good service and continue to improve.

Update:

The last CIB took place on 11th November 2022 with the next one scheduled for 17th January 2023. The following summarises the position presented to the November Board which, for children's social care, reflected performance and quality data to the end of Quarter 2:

The Board received papers on:

- SEND and the Local Area Partnership, including information on:
 - A planned LGA peer review scheduled for week commencing 27th March
 - GCC's engagement with the DfE's Delivering Better Value in SEND programme with partners asked to participate in the delivery stage from January 2023.
 - The SEND and Inclusion Local Area Partnership Board which is now established and chaired by the Director for Education. It reports into the Joint Commissioning and Partnership Executive, the Integrated Commissioning Board and Health and Wellbeing Board. In future it will also report to the CIB.
 - SEND green paper (consultation now closed) and the SEND inspection framework which was subsequently published on 29th November 2022^{vi}
- Proposal to develop a Children's Plan for Gloucestershire; a partnership document that focuses achieving for all children in the county, it will be coordinated by the Children's Coalition and will be focused on actions to achieve our vision of Gloucestershire as a county that works for all children
- Director for safeguarding and Care's report to the CIB together with performance and quality assurance reports.

The majority of actions within the CIP remain on track for delivery within allotted timescales. Some progress has been made against the metrics set out in the plan with twenty-one showing progress in the period (three more than previously reported), thirteen showing no significant change (three fewer than previously reported) and twenty-one regressing (one fewer than previously reported). This progress is not at the pace required and reflects the exceptionally challenging context in relation to demand, workforce, and the placement market for children in or needing our care.

As part of delivering our vision for children, there is a focus for social workers and managers on gaining greater autonomy over their working day, reducing unnecessary bureaucracy, and enabling quality engagement with children and families. This is in line with the recommendations of the Care Review. Practice Standards have been

revised, direct work kits issued to every worker and a more streamlined assessment process launched in Liquid Logic.

Systemic practice training continues to be rolled out at all levels of the workforce and evidences a positive impact in teams with stable and skilled team management and a permanent or long-standing workforce. Gloucester is worthy of note in this regard, as is Children in Care which had their highest rate (60%) of audits judged good or better in September 2022. However, in areas where it is proving more difficult to stabilise the workforce, such as Stroud and Tewkesbury, resilience is lower and progress slower.

Our focus on improving quality cannot be at the expense of compliance with what's required for children and must build on it. Some of the metrics indicate that compliance is not yet fully embedded across the system, for example, the timeliness of initial visits to children was an area of focused improvement earlier this year and which slipped back in August and has struggled to recover.

Our continued focus on creating the conditions for purposeful work and on developing frontline managers through the Social Work Academy Programme appears to be building some resilience with November's performance and quality data building on increasing stability and showing some areas of improvement:

- 55% of measures evidence 'Good' or better performance
- A further 38% of measures are within tolerance of target
- 50% of children's case audits were rated 'Good' or better – meeting target for the first time in 2022/23, with improvement seen in the quality of assessment and management oversight
- The proportion of audits rated Inadequate reduced to better than target.
- **Workforce** showed some early signs of stabilising with slightly reduced turnover and vacancy rates across children's social care, although as stated above, there is significant challenge in some social work offices.
- 35 newly qualified social workers who joined the council between June and September are all on course to progress into their substantive roles between March and July 2023. The Social Work Academy is integral to the development of newly qualified social workers and has recently been highlighted by the LGA as an example of best practice^{vii}.
- Further measures have been approved that are aimed at stabilising a permanent workforce including, an increased number of social work apprentice opportunities in 2023, a tender for overseas recruitment, development of the social work recruitment

microsite^{viii}, and improved induction and career progression opportunities

- 86% of children experienced no or only one change of Social Worker in the preceding 6 months which is positive given the increasing number of children open to Social Care overall.
- Increased demand means that Social Workers with a caseload level in line with the target of eighteen children or fewer per full-time worker, reduced to 61.4% and the percentage with twenty-three or fewer children reduced to 90.4%.
- Plans are being developed that will put in place additional family support work capacity to help reduce reliance on agency social workers and assist GCC social workers in completing tasks in the face of increasing demand.
- The care population which appeared to have stabilised after the summer has again grown, largely impacted by the significant pressures that vulnerable families are facing. This in turn places significant pressure on placements locally both in-house and across the independent sector, driving costs up and adversely impacting placement stability. There are a number of measures set out in the new Sufficiency Strategy 2022-25 aimed at increasing local capacity and delivering enhanced value for money. The Strategy will be considered by Cabinet on 25th January 2023.

However, there remain some notable areas where improvement activity has yet to show the intended impact including the timeliness of Strategy Discussions, the timeliness of initial visits, the consistency of return interviews for missing children and placement stability. Further analysis and actions are in place to drive improvement in 2023.

In meeting the challenges outlined above, there is a critical role for our partners, schools and settings, health and mental health, police, and the voluntary and community sector. This is particularly true in delivering against the five recommendations made by Ofsted in February 2022:

- The timeliness and application of consistent thresholds for child protection strategy meetings: - developments are led by Gloucestershire Children's Safeguarding Partnership and recommendations for improvement following a detailed review will be considered by the Safeguarding Executive in January 2023.
- The suitability of accommodation for care leavers to meet their needs, including to feel safe: - 91% of care leavers live in accommodation that is considered safe and suitable. With support from local housing partners new protocols are in draft form which should continue to help deliver improvements.
- The quality of case supervision and management: - the new supervision policy will be formally launched in January alongside the Academy's frontline manager skills' development programme.

With the aim of embedding the improved performance evident in November, the new approach is based on systemic practice principles and aims to reduce the bureaucratic burden on managers and practitioners by reducing the amount of form filling required.

- The timeliness with which personal advisers are allocated to children, to best support their transition and adulthood: - additional investment is in place to increase the number of personal advisers and recruitment has secured new candidates with an additional three personal advisers joining the workforce in January 2023. However, progress has been slower than intended due to existing advisers moving on and taking up new opportunities.
- How well IT systems support social workers to do their jobs: - IT improvements are evident and reported on positively across the children's workforce. Next steps will be to develop the system specific to the needs of social workers and social work leaders, including access to records whilst in the field and Power BI performance reporting.

In the forthcoming quarter, we will continue to drive stability, performance and quality as outlined in the CIP with the:

- Launch of a new Quality Assurance and Learning Framework that focuses on a strengths-based approach to quality improvement and introduces a learning panel and practice weeks
- Launch of a talent pipeline linked to career development and progression ('Growing in Gloucestershire') and of a Gloucestershire alumnus, keeping in touch with those who have taken up opportunities elsewhere
- Implementation of recommendations from the regional peer challenge into Safeguarding in Education
- Establishment of 'Killer KPIs' defining the smaller basket of proxy measures for children's safety and outcome delivery
- Review of the use of the 370 direct work kits issued to social workers as part of The Big Participation Conversation in 2022
- Progress of family led decision making following Gloucestershire's successful Family Inspired Conference in December 2022 which brought together partners, social care managers and families to discuss what works in helping build family led solutions
- Trevone House Review interim report
- Bright Spots survey results for children in care and care experienced young people
- Launch of 'Experts by Experience' group of parents and family members who have used our services (particularly child protection services)
- Launch of the new Care Leaver Offer and housing protocol, co-constructed with young people and partners and linked to the

regional sector-led improvement reciprocal Care Leaver offer that's in development. It will be shared with Mark Riddell, National Care Leaver Adviser during his visit on 7th and 8th February 2023

Inspection activity

- In the forthcoming year either a Joint Targeted Area Inspection to consider safeguarding across the Partnership or, a Focused Visit to consider a specific area of practice is anticipated. This is in line with the annual inspection cycle set out by Ofsted and will be in addition to the anticipated SEND inspection.
- A regulatory inspection of Hartwood House disabled children's short break home took place on the 31st of October and 1st November 2022 which found services to be inadequate. Immediate action was taken to review all children and relevant processes. A subsequent monitoring visit was undertaken by Ofsted on December 6th and reported that one of the requirements is now met in full and that 'good progress is being made to meet [all] the requirements made at the last inspection'. A further full inspection is anticipated in mid-February 2023.

Conclusion

Inspectors identified that children in Gloucestershire are better protected with improved service quality which means children are no longer left in situations where they are known to be at immediate risk. However, the service requires further development, the continued support of political and corporate colleagues and partners if it is to realise our ambition of a sustainably good service for children and families. It remains the case that improvements are hard won and may be easily lost without an unrelenting focus on delivering continuous improvement.

It is intended that as we remodel and develop further, that we build a resilient and skilled workforce and a system able to meet need at the earliest point, thereby reducing the number of children and families requiring lengthy or repeat interventions from social work services. By growing our family support offer in a way that enables families to achieve and maintain the changes they wish to see, and by working with families as our partners we may achieve our intention and begin to reduce the fragility of the current system which relies too heavily on specialist input.

Recommendation:

That Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- Consider the content of this update report and Continuous Improvement Plan (Appendix 1) to satisfy itself that the actions articulated therein set the course for intended improvement which, when delivered, will fully address the recommendations of the Ofsted inspection report and contribute to our overarching aim of a consistently good level of service for all

children and young people.

- Agree to receive periodic/regular updates on the progress and impact of delivery of the Improvement Plan

Appendices

Appendix 1 Improvement Plan v2.0 2022

End notes:

ⁱ [The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

ⁱⁱ [Independent review of children's social care - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Child Protection in England - May 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

^{iv} [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

^v [SEND review: right support, right place, right time - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

^{vi} [Area SEND inspections: framework and handbook - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

^{vii} [Gloucestershire County Council's Social Work Academy – addressing recruitment and retention in children's services | Local Government Association](#)

^{viii} [Children's Social Care careers - Gloucestershire County Council](#)