

# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 13 July 2023 commencing at 10.00 am at the .**

## **PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:**

Cllr Linda Cohen (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Cllr Dr David Drew	Cllr Paul McLain
Cllr Ben Evans (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Cllr Beki Hoyland	

## **Substitutes:**

**Apologies:** Charlotte Blanch, Cllr Emma Nelson, Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People and Cllr Kathy Williams

**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Stephen Davies (virtual)  
Cllr Philip Robinson (virtual)

## **2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2023 were accepted by the Committee.

## **3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

3.1 The chair declared an interest as a foster carer for GCC.

3.2 The chair also invited officers to comment on a recent incidence of violence against a teacher at Tewkesbury academy before going into the discussion items of the meeting.

3.3 Ann James, Director of Children's Services, explained that there was an ongoing police investigation and so she could not go into detail on events. She recognised the swift response of emergency services and the support that the school, students and community had given each other. She also thanked officers for their continued support to the school and its staff and pupils.

3.4 Councillors shared their support and asked what was in place to help schools in such scenarios and whether that support would carry on into the upcoming holidays. Kirsten Harrison, Director of Education, explained that schools had an

emergency response plan that the school's Head Teacher enacted very swiftly. She stressed that whilst the plans were in place, she could not guarantee the plans would be initiated as effectively if there were an incident at another school. She also explained that support would be ongoing and that officers would co-ordinate with Tewkesbury Borough Council to facilitate that.

3.5 Officers also explained that the Secondary Association already had concerns around vulnerabilities in the schooling system and that work was underway to combat serious youth violence.

#### **4. FURTHER EDUCATION**

4.1 Matthew Burgess, Principal of Gloucestershire College, gave a verbal summary of developments at the college and within further education across the county. He explained that Gloucestershire College provided a broad variety of education and vocational training to their pupils. He explained that there was a polarisation of attainment for 16+ students and Gloucestershire College's intake was predominantly those at the lower end. Mr Burgess stressed that resolving that polarisation was a key priority, providing those students that had not attained highly at GCSE level to succeed in their further education. Beyond Gloucestershire College, Mr Burgess gave a summary of the other colleges in the county and explained that these were collaborating effectively with each other.

4.2 Mr Burgess highlighted upcoming curriculum reforms, focusing on T levels that the government were introducing as a means to simplify the non-academic qualification route. These T levels were expected to be a meaningful qualification for young people, but there would be some work needed to fulfil the delivery of elements like the work experience component. Beyond T levels, he explained that a review of qualifications of all levels was expected in the coming years.

4.3 Mr Burgess explained that Gloucestershire College's focus was to provide young people with the skills necessary to succeed in life and as such they were mindful of skills shortages in the county. Since September 2022, it had also been a statutory requirement for colleges to demonstrate they were meeting local skills needs. Cyber, green skills and construction were highlighted as areas of particular need, but there were difficulties with providing teaching staff who could teach these shortage skills to the extent where students were not always able to enrol onto their top choice course.

4.4 Mr Burgess also highlighted difficulties with learner engagement and student mental health following the pandemic and explained that student safety and security was a growing concern.

4.5 In response to a question about how to re-engage vulnerable children and young people who had been disillusioned with the school system, Mr Burgess explained that programmes were set up to try and target such students and re-integrate them into education and skills training. He explained that around half of the young people at Gloucestershire College would be deemed disadvantaged, but

that there were regional differences that would affect what was available to disadvantaged young people.

4.6 The Director of Children's Services added that further education colleges offered a different environment to school so were the best opportunity to support disenfranchised young people and give them the skills necessary to succeed in life. She explained that more co-ordination between colleges and children's services could help highlight children that could most benefit from college enrolment.

4.7 In response to a question about financial support available for students to get to and from college or placements, it was explained that that was particularly difficult in the rural parts of Gloucestershire. Colleges were funding transport routes themselves and there were also some government subsidies, but the support was limited and transport costs could be prohibiting some young people from accessing further education.

4.8 In response to a question about Gloucestershire Engineering Training (GET) it was explained that Gloucestershire College dealt with a number of different engineering companies and programmes were offered in partnership with those companies.

4.9 Some members had questions about T levels and Mr Burgess explained that they would be coming on stream in 2025/26 and so employers would start getting applications from people with T level qualifications around 2027/28. The T levels would be a technical equivalent to the academic A level and they were introduced to simplify and raise the profile of the skills based education stream. The Government was planning work to promote the T levels and the colleges would work on ensuring companies understood the new qualifications from a hiring perspective and students and parents understood their value when picking what courses to do. Mr Burgess did highlight that it would take significant work to make sure T levels were well understood. He also explained that it would not be possible for a student to do A levels and T levels together.

4.10 A member asked how much colleges were working with employers to source teachers in subjects where there were shortages. Mr Burgess explained that there were good links in place with employers to provide support for their programmes but that if you were good at your job, you would make more money by doing it rather than teaching, so it was difficult to attract high quality professionals and even then, there was no guarantee that a high quality professional would also have the skills to be a high quality teacher.

4.11 In response to a question about direct financial support for enrolling in further education, it was explained that students were not provided an income and that their work experience placements were not paid for.

4.12 In response to a question about the Forest of Dean college at Dene Magna, it was explained that a significant proportion of students moved out of the Forest of Dean for their 11+ education and when the children got to 16, parents wanted them to stay in the out-of-district schools they were at to study their A levels. Dene

Magna received an outstanding rating from Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) in 2012 and had been the school of choice for many students as a result of that rating, but Mr Burgess explained that the Covid-19 pandemic had slowed down the college's progress. He also explained that whilst students doing academic or technical streams at Dene Magna had separate classes, they were socialising in the same spaces and were relatively well integrated.

4.13 In response to a question about children in care, Mr Burgess explained that they had a large SEN (special educational needs) provision with roughly 300 learners at Gloucestershire College that were funded through the High Needs Budget from the County Council and this provision had grown significantly in the last few years. The colleges worked hard to identify children in care and to collaborate with the Transition Panel to support those students.

4.14 A member asked what would happen if a course was oversubscribed. Mr Burgess explained that in those cases an alternative course that did have capacity would be offered to students, but otherwise they would have to look elsewhere.

4.15 A member asked about collaboration with the Virtual School. Mr Burgess explained that he was aware that there were some links between the Virtual School and further education colleges, but he did not know about it in detail.

4.16 In response to a question about supporting adults who wished to get back into work, Mr Burgess explained that funding for adult education had been gradually cut and now the adult education cohort at Gloucestershire College was much smaller than it had been in the past. He also explained that of the roughly £4 million budget for adult education, a lot of that funded 19-year olds in full time programmes. He highlighted that colleges were limited by how much funding government would provide.

## **5. CARE LEAVERS NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING (NEET) AND THOSE NOT IN SUITABLE ACCOMODATION**

5.1 Vanessa Catterall, Head of Service for 11-25 children in care and care leavers, gave a summary of the report. She explained that the care leaver population was large and growing in Gloucestershire and that the target was to have a high number of those young people in Education, Employment or Training. Some care leavers were NEET (not in education, employment or training) because of being parents, some through illness but there was also a number of other barriers highlighted in the report. It was explained that officers were tracking care leavers in unsuitable accommodation and were working to improve care leaver engagement with EET. Mark Riddell, National Implementation Advisor for care leavers, had been impressed with the level of support for care leavers in his recent 2 day visit to Gloucestershire (May 2023) and had recommended tracking when disengagement began for NEET care leavers. The officer highlighted some difficulties that care leavers had with housing and the support that was offered to help. The officer explained that the Placement Sufficiency Plan set out how the County Council would increase the number of suitable homes for children in and leaving care, but

the availability of tenancies for care leavers ready to move to independence would still be a significant barrier. The County worked with District Council housing colleagues to try to ensure that care leavers were prioritised for housing. Trevone House, supported accommodation, was also visited by Mark Riddell during his visit to Gloucestershire. He found it to be an exceptional development, and recommended it be replicated.

5.2 In response to a question about how long someone had been out of education, employment or training when registered as NEET, the officer said she would look into that data and circulate that information.

**ACTION – DSU to circulate data from Vanessa Caterrall with the Committee**

5.3 A member asked whether Gloucestershire's number of NEETs were relatively high in comparison to other counties as it had been historically. The officer explained that in the last year, performance was better than statistical neighbours but that it would be important to ensure this improvement was sustained.

5.4 In response to a question about who was there to support care leavers with day-to-day difficulties, it was explained that each care leaver had a personal adviser who would stay with them until they were 25 years old. The officer explained that sometimes that relationship was very strong but it was very variable and if the relationship was not good, they would explore changing the adviser. She also explained that sometimes the care leaver had different needs and it was important to adapt to those.

5.5 Members asked for more detail about the meetings with the personal adviser and the officer explained that there was a pathway planning process which was reviewed twice a year in a meeting between the young person and their adviser. It was all tailored to the young person with meetings set at a frequency agreed with the young person and with a focus on helping the young person to achieve the goals set out in their pathway plan. New personal advisers had been recruited to ensure young people could be allocated a personal adviser from the age of 16, and training was offered to new starters and those already in post. It was also explained that care leavers had their personal adviser's phone number and could contact them directly at any point.

**6. SCOPING FOR FUTURE ITEM ON PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND CHILD GROOMING**

6.1 Ann James introduced Paul Shallcross, the new Director of Safeguarding at GCC, and gave a brief summary of the attached scoping plan which set out terms to explore child sexual exploitation as a form of abuse.

6.2 Several members expressed satisfaction with the plan.

6.3 A member stressed the need to look at the policy for how safeguarding was approached and in particular safeguarding training.

6.4 A member asked if the report would be joint with the police and the officer explained that relevant officers would be involved, including the police.

6.5 A member suggested that it might be helpful to have a better understanding of what the sex offenders register meant and how it was used in the report.

6.6 A member asked about the information gathering process for cases of child abuse and the officer explained that often, incidences of abuse that included suspected sexual abuse were not prosecuted for the sexual aspects because of the difficulty gathering the necessary evidence. The officer also explained that generational abuse would be covered in the report.

6.7 The Chair suggested arranging an additional meeting in October to discuss the report.

**ACTION – DSU to arrange an additional meeting in October**

## **7. JOINT TARGET AREA INSPECTION UPDATE**

7.1 Ann James gave a verbal update of the recent Joint Target Area Inspection in June 2023. She explained that the report was still being checked but was expected to be published on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2023. The officer explained the inspection was focused on Gloucestershire County Council's early response to need and risk – the 'front door'. The inspection ran over 3 weeks and was very thorough. Inspectors met with over 100 members of staff and reviewed 1000s of documents. The officer was impressed by the response of staff to prepare for the inspection and the feedback so far had been largely positive. Inspectors had given a small number of recommendations such as around digitization of information sharing, but underlined that children that needed support were swiftly supported by children's services. The officer highlighted that this inspection only covered a section of the system, but it was very promising that inspectors saw improvement and safe delivery in this aspect of the service.

7.2 A member suggested that the IT feedback be shared with the relevant officers so they were aware of where improvements were needed. The officer explained that the feedback was predominantly around data sharing between different agencies.

**ACTION – DSU to liaise with Mandy Quayle about who is responsible for the next steps to develop a platform for data sharing/data integration that best fulfilled the recommendations regarding data sharing.**

7.3 A member congratulated the performance in the inspection but stressed their dissatisfaction that IT was still holding the service back. It was explained that part of the changes recommended would need work on partner IT which would take time. The officer was optimistic that the work that had been undertaken in IT already would put children's services in a good place to fulfil the IT recommendations.

7.4 In response to a question about who owned the software that interfaced between partners and GCC, the officer explained that IT officers would be best placed to answer those questions. Another officer explained that in their previous position at a different council they had received government funding to trial an IT integration system and that he could explore whether Gloucestershire could get involved.

**ACTION – Paul Shallcross to explore whether Gloucestershire County Council can learn from or be involved in current data integration trailblazer work.**

## **8. FAMILY HUB TIMELINE**

8.1 A member asked about a Committee visit to a Family Hub.

**ACTION – DSU to arrange a Committee visit to Family Hubs**

8.2 A member asked if bidders were pre-warned when a tender process was upcoming. The officer explained that a delay had been added to ensure the correct tender process. However, it was explained that bidders were aware and preparing to make bids.

8.3 In response to a question about who was responsible for Family Hubs, the officer explained that Gloucestershire County Council was ultimately responsible and that there would be an integrated governance arrangement which would comprise of the Family Hub lead, area managers, local education leads, health, police and representatives from voluntary sectors.

8.4 A member asked about visiting Trevone House. There was some discussion over the most appropriate way to facilitate that.

**ACTION – DSU to explore with Ann James a Committee visit to Trevone House**

## **9. WORK PLAN**

9.1 The following updates to the work plan were discussed:

- The Home Schooling item for the September 2023 meeting had been planned to cover changes to home schooling in the white paper but no changes were proposed.
- Multi-agency integration in Children's Services IT to be added to the September 2023
- Home School Transport in rural areas to be added to the planned additional meeting for October
- DSU to reach out to Dave Jones about the Annual Safeguarding Report for the November meeting.
- The Area SEND Inspection report was predicted to be ready for the January 2024 meeting

*Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting*

- The Autism Strategy discussion item was planned for the July 2024 meeting.
- A member proposed a discussion item covering youth work in Gloucestershire, both statutory and voluntary for the March 2024 meeting. It was suggested to invite representatives from the statutory and voluntary.

**ACTION – DSU to make the above changes to the work plan**

For a full overview of this meeting, please use the following link to access the recording <https://gloucestershire.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcasts>

**CHAIRPERSON**

Meeting concluded at 12:07