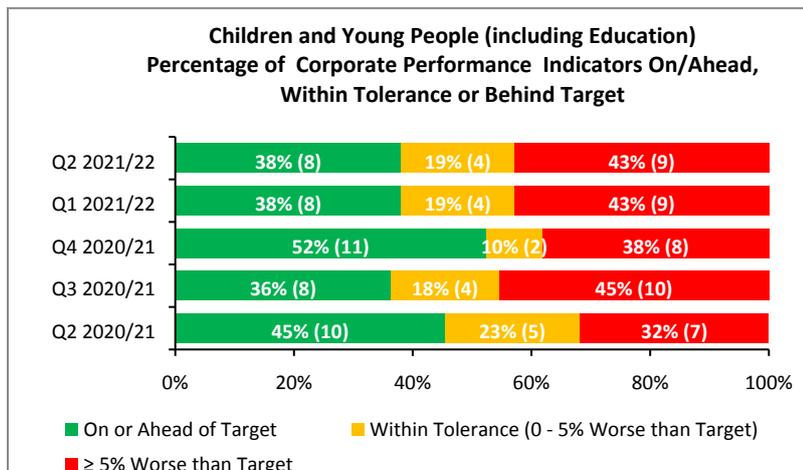


Children and Families Overview Scrutiny Committee

Performance Report Quarter 2 2021/22



1. A good proportion of Audits judge Social Care practice to be Requires Improvement (RI) or better (90%). Performance improved slightly in Quarter 2 but performance against target has changed from better than to within tolerance of target due to a stretch target being implemented this quarter. The target rose from 88% to 91% to support the continuous drive for improvement in quality of practice. Two-fifths of children's cases audited were judged of a Good or Outstanding standard (38%). This is a decline compared with last quarter (44%) with more cases audited judged as Requires Improvement in Quarter 2, 52% up from 45%.

Our Accelerated Improvement Plan, Quality Assurance and Performance Management Framework continue to provide the key drivers for improvement activity. Our Team Improvement Plan and Essentials 2.0 and 3.0 programmes enable practitioners to hone their skills in support of improving outcomes for children and families. Recent operating conditions have been challenging due to increased demand and churn in our work force. Senior leaders have taken action to address these including putting into place an Innovate Team to progress permanence and a case file screening programme to address any recording or practice deficiencies. 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* remains rated as Moderate (8) as work to continue to strengthen practice continues.

2. Contact demand remained high in September. In the 3 previous financial years, the number of contacts received quarterly, on average, was between 6,500-7,500. Since March when children returned to school following the third lockdown, contacts have been exceptionally high, with the quarterly average in 2021/22 rising to more than 8,700. Around 40% of incoming demand continues to close following initial contact, with half of these contacts receiving advice, guidance and support at the point of contact. The high level of incoming demand may be impacting initial decision making performance, with timeliness of decisions reducing from 88.2% to 81.2%. Performance was also significantly lower than at the same time last year (92.4%) and worse than target (90%).
3. Our initial response to risk also needs to improve in relation to the timeliness of initial visits. Performance has followed a declining trend since March 2020 when 87.7% of initial visits were timely compared with 69.5% in Quarter 2. Timeliness of visits to those children progressing under Section 47, where potential harm is evident, is also under-performing at 76% (against a target of 85%). Timeliness of single assessments improved in Quarter 2 and is performing within tolerance of target.

4. The proportion of repeat referrals remained similar to last quarter (24.4%). Performance remains slightly worse than target (22.5%). In-month, re-referrals saw a spike in July 2021 as the schools closed for Summer (30.5%). However, in August and September, re-referrals were better than target and our peer group comparator average at 21.9% and 21.4%. Performance has been better than target for 4 of the last 5 months indicating that the work localities are doing to review the reasons for re-referrals each month is gaining traction and beginning to impact the level of re-referrals received.
5. The proportion of children starting second and subsequent plans within the quarter has been following a broadly reducing trend, from 32.8% at the same time last year to 27.4%. However, in-month there are significant peaks and troughs in performance which raise questions about assurance in the security of overall improvement. Repeat protection planning remains worse than our peer comparators (23.3% Mar-20) and the South West (22.3% Jun-21). One-third of children subject to protection planning have had a previous protection plan (35%) and 9.5% of children are subject to a 3rd, 4th or 5th plan. Practice needs to improve in order to make a sustained difference for children.
6. The proportion of repeat admissions within 12 months remained low (3.4%) and better than target and national levels (11.4%).
7. The number of children in care remained high throughout Quarter 2, with 834 children in care at the end of September. 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 (73%). Overall, 64% of children in our care are looked after by in-house Foster Carers. This has reduced for the second quarter, from 70% in March 2021. Performance is now worse than target (70%).

Note: that there have been some minor adjustments to the way in which placement stability is calculated based on the way the DfE categorises placement disruption. However, demand pressures mean that long and short-term placement stability remain a challenge. Short-term stability continues to perform worse than target and has worsened marginally over the last two quarters from 15.8% to 16.2% of children in care living in more than 3 placements in 12 months. While the change in calculation methodology means that long-term placement stability was better than target in Quarter 2, performance had declined for the second quarter from 69.3% to 66%.

The difficulties in the provider market, due to Covid-19 and other factors, continue and this is making it very challenging to place some children and young people. Our Sufficiency Strategy continues to provide the focal point for our work to ensure we have the right placements for our children and young people. Trevone House is now operational and providing care for some of our most complex young people. Plans are well advanced to extend this model to other sites. Proposals for a parent and child assessment provision are also well advanced. The risk relating to *failure to develop sufficient placement capacity to meet the needs of looked after children* remains rated as moderate (12).

8. Turnover within Children's Services is marginally higher than within the Council as a whole (12.2% compared with 11.7%). However, turnover of Children's Social Workers increased for the fourth quarter, up from 11.2% to 22.1% (relates to newly qualified Social Workers, Social Workers and Senior Social Workers but excludes Agency workers). Our Workforce Development Strategy continues to draw upon a wide range of sources in growing our own practitioners - including Frontline, increased ASYEs, Students, Step Up, Apprenticeships and Overseas Social Workers. We keep our employment offer under review and have recently revised our Agency rate to ensure it remains competitive. The Social Work Academy provides a rich curriculum to support professional development. An extensive range of employee support is also in place for practitioners.

More recently we have experienced greater churn in our workforce and an increase in vacancies due to difficulties in recruitment, particularly in our Safeguarding and Assessment teams. The situation is further compounded by increased demand leading to higher caseloads. At the end of September, the number of children open to Social Care was at the highest level recorded (4,335 children). This is 5% higher than the 2019/20 average. This has resulted in continued pressure on achieving caseload levels in line with our target of 18 children or fewer (68% of Social Workers). This is at the lowest level since March 2019. Senior leaders are working with HR colleagues to respond and ensure improvement activity is not affected.

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* increased from Moderate (8) to Moderate (12) while strategies to stabilise and upskill the workforce are ongoing.

9. Fewer young people (16-17 years old) in Gloucestershire are not in education, employment or training than nationally (1.3% compared with 4.5%); this is an improvement from 2.3% in Quarter 1. Outcomes remain poorer for our Care Leavers with 45.1% of those aged 19-21 years not in employment, education or training at the end of Quarter 2. While this is an improvement compared with last quarter (51.9%), historic trends indicate that it is a challenge for us to maintain performance as the academic year progresses. Performance also remains significantly below our Care Leavers aspirations.
10. Just under one-fifth of our children in care, for whom we are the corporate parent, were classified as persistently absent (an attendance rate of 90% or less) in Quarter 2 (18.4%). This is higher than at the same time last year (14.8%), however, 6.3% of school aged children in care were classified as persistently absent due to illness in the first month of the academic year.
11. As a result of Covid-19 pre-existing inequalities have been exacerbated and vulnerable learners continue to be disproportionately affected. This is a trend that is being seen nationally and as a result the rate per 1,000 children with an Education Health and Care plan (EHCP) has continued to increase (up for the fifth quarter from 23.2 to 26.6). There has been unprecedented demand over the summer and in September for EHCP Assessments which has impacted the service's ability to meet statutory timescales. As the service works through these assessments, there is expected to be a continued growth in the number of children who are issued with EHCPs. This will have a significant impact on the high needs budget.
12. 13 children were permanently excluded during Quarter 2 2021/22 compared with 8 children in Quarter 2 2020/21. An increase in permanent exclusions was a potential outcome from both the return to school after a second period of full lockdown and the removal of "bubble" restrictions for September 2021. The start of the new academic year has required students and staff to readjust and return to 'normal', alongside mental health and behavioural impacts from 18 months of disruption and the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 cases in schools. 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. Work is underway to understand the themes around exclusions in particular settings as there remains an ongoing variation in permanent exclusion numbers in different school settings and localities.
13. Since September, Ofsted have returned to inspecting schools under the 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 removed the exemption from inspection of schools judged Outstanding. Schools holding a long-standing, Outstanding judgement which haven't been inspected for a significant period will now become subject to the inspection schedule. This may impact on the proportion of pupils in Gloucestershire attending Good and, particularly, Outstanding schools. There has been quite a high frequency of inspections in Gloucestershire since resumption in September. Final reports have not yet been published for the majority of those schools in Gloucestershire that were inspected in late September and October. The proportion of pupils attending Good or Outstanding settings therefore remains the same this quarter but may reduce during 2021/22 as the inspection programme progresses.
14. The impact of Covid-19 has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. Whilst national benchmarking data collection was disrupted in 2020 and 2021 making it difficult to assess the impact on education for different pupil groups and how we compare to other areas, the gap for vulnerable young people does appear to be widening and that vulnerable learners have been disproportionately affected.

The further development of the currently named Education Reference Group and closer working established with all settings throughout the pandemic and recovery period will be key in developing understanding of impacted groups and the scale of impact. This will inform planning in order to address those gaps, in partnership with the transformational project work already underway which is focused on High Needs provision. 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* remains Moderate (12).