

Gloucestershire County Council Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Report from Independent Chair of the Children's Services Improvement Board

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report is for consideration by the Committee at its meeting on 25 November 2021.
- 1.2. My last report as Independent Chair was for the Committee's July meeting which had been the first for a considerable time. I was able to report on the measures taken by the service and the continuation of the work of the Improvement Board through the various lockdowns. I am able to report that the Board has continued to be very active and has continued to meet virtually on a monthly basis.
- 1.3. Following discussions between the Council and the DFE there has been a recent change in the pattern of Board meetings which have moved to being every other month. There has also been an agreement that the agenda should move to a more thematic basis and a reduction in the routine reporting. It is too early at this stage to comment on the effectiveness of this but the change does have the support of Board members. I have continued to have regular discussions and meetings with relevant staff and Board members in between meetings, also virtually.
- 1.4. I have continued to be very active in the period between July and now and have held regular discussions with:
 - Directors and senior managers within the Children's Services
 - Senior managers from other parts of the Council, including the Chief Executive
 - Cabinet Member
 - Board members individually
 - DFE colleagues
- 1.5. Again, I have continued to be able to meet, albeit virtually, with front line managers and teams. I am most grateful to them for making, at times, complicated arrangements to enable this to happen but it has been absolutely invaluable in order to keep in touch with how staff have been coping with the emergency arrangements necessary and how effectively they believe they have been able to work as well as how morale has been holding up. In particular I have held meetings with:
 - The Cotswold Locality
 - The Leaving Care Service
 - MASH

2. Position Statement

- 2.1. At the time of my last report to the Committee, which spanned a long period of time, I was highlighting the following:
 - the welcome increase in the pace of improvement

- the sustained level of that improvement and the improved quality of social work practice
 - audit outcomes demonstrating a higher proportion of good or outstanding casework.
 - recognition of these points by Ofsted in their focused visit of 2020 and of the important strides that the Council had made in maintaining and developing services during the pandemic
 - the huge effort it has taken to achieve this and the toll on staff, particularly in the third lockdown and expectation that the phased return to offices will have a positive impact on morale
 - whether, as a consequence of this, there had been a flattening of the performance improvement curve, although still moving in the right direction
 - there remained a need for significant improvements to be achieved rapidly in some specific areas of activity such as stability of placements for children in care
 - the continuing strength of the quality assurance processes and the embedding of the practice fundamentals model
 - the innovation that had occurred during the lockdown, some of which such as Trevone House has received national recognition.
- 2.2. The Committee can be reassured that the momentum and attention to practice improvement remains evident within the reports received by the Board. This is in spite of all of the issues arising from the management of the pandemic.
- 2.3. However, I do not think it would be contentious to say that the pace of change has slowed. There are three key reasons for this that need to be brought to the Committee's considerations.
- 2.4. The first is that there is a level of tiredness within the service. The emergency working conditions and the loss of opportunity for the informal peer support which is so important for staff in this work have taken their toll. This has been discussed previously but the situation has been exacerbated by the other two points discussed below. Again, the waiting for inspection remains a growing pressure on staff and managers.
- 2.5. The second is that there has been a significant and sustained increase in referrals and demand. This has, to some extent, been a national phenomenon and not entirely unexpected. It was always likely that demand was suppressed last year as a consequence of lockdown and some services reducing their level of activity or being closed completely. The increase in demand and activity has been persistent and rising. Most importantly a significant proportion of it is real and high priority. Relatively low levels of it can be assessed as needing no action or simply referred on to other agencies. Inevitably this has intensified the pressure evident within the service. The Council faces one that is running hot as it prepares for inspection, a scenario which could be seen as less than ideal.
- 2.6. Thirdly, the service has seen a significant and concerning downturn in recruitment and retention of social workers. It is clear that the recruitment market has become more active and in favour of applicants. Strong competition has reappeared between local authorities, a bidding war between them. This is causing significant gaps in the establishment of some teams which has led to the number of social workers with higher caseloads than target has increased markedly and the numbers of children experiencing multiple social workers within a short space of time. The service has also described to me examples of

unprofessional conduct from some agency workers in moving on to other assignments within weeks of their arrival. All this has uncomfortable echoes of the situation some years ago and it represents a clear risk to the improvement programme.

- 2.7. In addition, the report laid particular emphasis on the major problems that had been experienced with the I. T. platform. At that stage some improvements were becoming apparent. It is pleasing to be able to note that those improvements have been sustained. The platform is proving to be significantly more reliable and having far less impact upon social workers' ability to progress their work and, thus, on performance. Staff have been at pains to point out to me that the problems are not wholly resolved but are acknowledging the improvement. This has been as a result of considerable work across the whole Council.
- 2.8. A further development of specific note in the work of the Improvement Board has been a change in the method of engagement with and input from the Ambassadors. The need for this has arisen from the need for Board meetings to be virtual. This has made it very difficult for young people to attend as would have been the case previously. The change has been that the Ambassadors have produced a video discussing issues of concern to them and commenting on agenda items being considered by the Board. The contents of the video are discussed at Board meetings and a response to the issues raised is sent to them from myself as Chair. To date this approach has been well received on all sides.

3. Analysis

- 3.1. At the time of writing the Council is still awaiting notification from Ofsted of an inspection. This is a pressure on the whole service and there is a view expressed that the sooner the inspection comes the better. Although it is the case that there is always more that can be done, in my view that the Service is ready for it to happen.
- 3.2. The overall position is one of a continued drive for improvement but one which is under threat, particularly in terms of pace. This comes from external circumstances to a significant degree. There are a number of important positives which provide a now more fully embedded foundation to a service moving in the right direction. These include:
 - A strong self-awareness as reflected in the Self Assessment document
 - Clearer evidence of social workers knowing their children well and able to speak authoritatively about the work they are doing.
 - An effective and functioning quality assurance system
 - A Team Improvement programme which appears to be having beneficial and lasting impact
 - A practice model which is well understood and embedded and will provide a strong foundation from which to move on to a clearer model of systemic social work.
 - A strong sense of shared purpose across the key agencies
 - A sustained commitment across the Council to achieve lasting improvements to services for children, young people and their families.
 - A dynamic and creative approach to service commissioning.

- 3.3. All of these issues and more are and will stand the service in good stead not just for the forthcoming challenge but, more importantly, for the longer term challenge of achieving a sustainably good service.
- 3.4. However, as this report has set out above, this is a service under some strain and which is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the momentum which has been created. As has been stated, these are largely the local manifestations of national trends but, inevitably, for an Authority in Gloucestershire's position the implications are sharper and the impact more profound. All experience shows that for a service which continues to carry a judgement of "inadequate," issues around recruitment and retention and provider behaviour can be that much more difficult to manage through.
- 3.5. This report has previously identified the key components creating this strain. They are, no doubt, inter - related to a degree. They do, however, represent points of risk to the Service. Encouragingly, managers are being active in trying to address and mitigate them where possible. Self-evidently, significant increases in demand upon an already tired staff group coming out of the emergency lockdown arrangements are going to be problematic. There has been some increase in staffing resources and some movement to shore up key services. There has also been key inter agency discussion on mitigation of this reported to the Improvement Board.
- 3.6. In terms of risk, the factor that is causing the greatest anxiety is the current, deteriorating position on recruitment and retention. As with the ICT issues, this will require a combined effort across the Children's and Corporate services to make inroads into the problem. The Committee can take some reassurance from the discussions held at the Improvement Board which demonstrate that this commitment exists and actions have been taken to try and address the problem, including the harmonisation of agency rates of pay. However, it is clearly not a situation entirely within the control of the Council. It is particularly of concern that the opening up of the market again has seen the re-emergence in the Council's experience of agency staff coming and going within weeks when they might have received an improved financial offer or an opportunity closer to home. Whilst this could be seen as understandable one wonders where consideration of the child features in this thinking.
- 3.7. This aspect is also one of concern, very eloquently pointed out by the Ambassadors in their most recent video contribution to the Board. None of this happens without impact on the children and young people affected. It will be of huge importance that staff and management at all levels do not lose sight of this aspect of the issue as this will become more widely apparent.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1. This report on the work of the Improvement Board has attempted to demonstrate the various pressures upon the service alongside the continued drive for improvement. The Committee will have recognised that there are some clear nuances within the current situation, considerable strengths but equally some clear risks. The balance at the moment is a delicate one, but considering it in full, there remains a strong reason for optimism for the Committee.

- 4.2. The major areas of risk have been set out above and represent major challenges for the senior management and to the corporate centre of the Council. Again, the Committee can be reassured that there is effective working together and focus on Children's Services as a priority. This, of course, should not be something that is in doubt. More difficult and more important is the impact of these issues on front line staff and especially children, young people and their families. The figures on a performance report only tell one so much, collectively we need to ensure that we are taking the measures which enable us to understand impact and to be able to demonstrate that understanding both positive and less so. The Council is doing a great deal in this regard and with some success but experience suggests that it can be difficult to retain that perspective to the desired degree when under severe pressure.
- 4.3. This may, or may not, be my final report before inspection. Whilst there is still much to play for and scope for things to go wrong always, there remains cause for optimism about how well it might go.

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