

Minutes of the meeting of Children and young people scrutiny committee held at Online meeting on Tuesday 1 December 2020 at 1.00 pm

Present: Councillor Carole Gandy (chairperson)
Councillor Diana Toynbee (vice-chairperson)

Councillors: Paul Andrews, Phillip Howells and Mike Jones

Co-optees: Mr James and Mr Pratley

Officers: Director for children and families, Interim Head of Legal Services, Assistant Director Safeguarding and Family Support, Strategic business intelligence manager Children and Families, Assistant Director Children's Safeguarding Quality and Improvement and Assistant Director Education Development and Skills

10. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Graham Andrews and Kath Hey.

11. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Mr Sam Pratley declared a other interest in agenda number 8, review of performance and progress against the safeguarding and family support improvement plan, as the Chairman of Vennture. The report and appendices made reference to the Family First, an early help initiative in Herefordshire involving Vennture.

12. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting on 15 September are approved as a correct record and signed by the chairperson.

13. UPDATE ON REDUCING THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER (CLA)

The committee considered a report from the assistant director safeguarding and family support (ADS&FS) which provided an update on reducing the number of children looked after (CLA). The report was introduced by the Head of Children Looked After (HCLA) who explained that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted upon foster placements and the number of children looked after currently in residential units was a concern. An initiative to retain and recruit foster carers was in effect and marketing improvements were being made to the campaign. An update on changes to the Herefordshire Intensive Placements Support Service was provided to the committee.

The committee raised the points below in the debate that followed:

- The edge of care service had been in effect since April 2020 and it was queried what percentage of children had been diverted from care during this period. It was recommended that monitoring and recording of numbers of children prevented from entering care by the edge of care service was undertaken. *The*

HCLA explained that the service had worked with 14 children and prevented 12 from entering care arrangements. Of the two that had entered care one had returned home and the other had remained in care.

- *The reason for delays in progressing long-term matching decisions was queried. The HCLA explained that it had not been afforded sufficient priority which had now been corrected by ensuring there was more effective monitoring arrangements including a review at 9 month intervals.*
- *The reasons that foster carers did not wish to enter into special guardianship orders (SGOs) were queried. The HCLA explained the variety of reasons including concern over reduced financial support and the requirement to manage contact with family members. The ADS&FS explained that the notion of SGOs was being introduced to foster carers at an earlier stage of contact with potential carers.*
- *Statistics concerning the number of children leaving care and preventing admission to care were raised and how they compared to other areas. The timescales for matching neighbouring areas were queried. The HCLA explained that the number of children leaving care was improving and coming into line with neighbouring areas however the objective of the service was to improve to a level that was better than the performance of neighbours. The ADS&FS explained children would always be taken into care and it was important to avoid drift and delay in decision making over children in care which was potentially harmful to families and children. The HCLA explained that more detail would be available at the end of the financial year and that the year 2024 had been identified to match neighbouring performance. The Director Children and Families (DCF) explained that it was intended that the level of children looked after would not exceed 320 by the end of 2021 and that an increase in the level of children looked after in residential provision was a trend consistent across a number of councils resulting in overspending budgets. There were a number of plans in effect to reduce the number of children looked after and it was important that scrutiny had oversight of how the plans were taken forward.*
- *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on foster care placements was queried. The HCLA explained that some foster carers had not been undertaking placements during the pandemic due to health concerns. Some respite placements had been held in reserve to care for children looked after who may have been in the care of foster carers who had become infected during the pandemic. Interest and enquiries concerning fostering had continued during the pandemic.*
- *Where no suitable foster placements were found it was queried what problems prevented a placement and what options were available for those children looked after. The placement of multiple children looked after in residential settings was queried. The ADS&FS explained that it was a decision for individual foster carers to accept children and it was recognised that it was a significant undertaking even with the support received from the council. A very active placements team sought appropriate placements for children but if there were none available placement in residential care would occur. The HCLA explained that no two children who were looked after in Herefordshire were currently placed in the same residential unit. There were a number of residential units and providers inside Herefordshire and outside the county which were regularly monitored to ensure the standard and quality of placements was maintained.*
- *It was queried whether the construction and operation of a council-owned residential facility for children looked after could be investigated. It was felt that the executive should investigate the cost benefit of the construction and operation of a council-owned residential care facility for children looked after. The DCF explained that this was being looked into together with an investigation into the range of providers in the county and the number of children from outside Herefordshire currently cared for by these providers.*

- The availability of additional funding in the county to support the response to the COVID-19 pandemic was raised and how it was being passed onto communities. The impact of the pandemic on the budget for children and families was raised and whether savings or reductions were expected. *The DCF explained that it was an evolving picture with forms of funding being provided, such as the hardship fund, and the possibility that further funding could be announced. It was confirmed that the budget consultation needed to be completed which would ensure that the impact of the pandemic on budgets would be better understood. It was noted that the investment that had occurred in the programme of improvement for children and families had resulted in significant advancements which needed to be sustained in order to avoid the potential for variable performance. The assistant director children's safeguarding quality and improvement explained that an improvement programme could take up to five years to complete and budget reductions could undermine the pace at which improvement was achieved.*

The cabinet member children and families explained that the downward trend in the reduction of children in care was positive and efforts to recruit foster carers were being taken forward.

Councillor Carole Gandy proposed and Councillor Paul Andrews seconded the recommendations below which were agreed by the committee.

RESOLVED: That the committee:

- **Recommends that the children's and families directorate continue the monitoring of the number of children diverted from care by the edge of care service;**
- **Maintains an oversight of plans and initiatives to reduce the numbers of children looked after; and**
- **Recommends that the executive investigates the cost benefit of the construction and operation of a council-owned residential unit for children looked after.**

14. REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE AND PROGRESS AGAINST THE SAFEGUARDING AND FAMILY SUPPORT IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The committee considered a report by the assistant director for children's safeguarding quality and improvement (ADCSQ&I). The ADCSQ&I introduced the report and explained that there was a shift towards robust audits and there had been an increase in the number of audits that had produced good outcomes. Challenges remained around staff supervision, the timeliness of return to home interview and repeat referrals to the Multi-agency safeguarding hub.

During the course of the debate the committee raised the following points:

- The timeliness of the presentation of data in the quarterly report to the committee. The report before the committee provided data up to the end of September 2020 and it was recommended that the dates of forthcoming meetings of the committee were synchronised more closely with the production of the improvement plan report.
- The committee queried the work that had been undertaken with other areas including Doncaster and Essex. *The DCF, ADS&FS and ADCSQ&I provided detail on the work undertaken with other local authorities to help shape improvements to safeguarding processes and practices.*

- The recommendation from cabinet that the committee undertake a review into barriers to record-keeping for safeguarding cases was raised. It was recommended that future versions of the improvement plan report contain information on the improvements to Mosaic and the use of technology to enable better social work practice. A letter would be sent to the executive to explain that the committee would use the improvement plan to monitor record keeping for safeguarding cases.
- The committee recommended that in future the improvement plan contain detail of the recording of feedback from young people and the use of the mind of my own (MOMO) app.
- The risk assessing of children at risk of exploitation was raised and the action to change the target for the completion of risk assessments. *The ADS&FS explained that the target was being brought into line with targets used in the rest of the country.*
- The categories of need in child protection plans were raised. Assurance was sought that where a case was considered in the emotional or neglect category but a sexual harm element was present, this was taken into account and not missed. *The ADCSQ&I explained that the quality assurance work that had been undertaken had demonstrated that sexual abuse aspects had been identified. The ADS&FS explained that an investigation had been undertaken on the use of the categorisations of abuse and the outcome had shown that there had been no cases where sexual abuse had been missed.*

The cabinet member children and families explained that it was pleasing that the trend was positive and that improvement was being made. It was acknowledged that improvement was still required and it was key to the process that the council had a good understanding of itself.

The recommendations below were proposed by Councillor Carole Gandy and seconded by Councillor Phillip Howells and agreed by the committee.

RESOLVED: That the committee:

- **Recommends that the dates of forthcoming meetings of the committee are timed to coincide more closely with the production of the improvement plan report;**
- **Recommends that future versions of the improvement plan report contain more information on the improvements to Mosaic and the use of technology to enable better social work practice;**
- **Agreed that a letter would be sent to the executive to explain that the committee would use the improvement plan quarterly report to monitor record keeping for safeguarding cases; and**
- **Recommends that in future the improvement plan contain detail of the recording of feedback from young people and the use of the mind of my own (MOMO) app.**

15. WORK PROGRAMME REVIEW

The committee considered its work programme 2020/21 and received the executive responses to the child exploitation task and finish group and the recommendations of the committee on the review of peer on peer abuse cases.

The Chairperson confirmed that: a scoping document for a task and finish group on paediatric therapies would be brought to the meeting of the committee in January; and a briefing note would be circulated regarding SEND following which a decision would be made whether to initiate a task and finish group on the topic.

The committee requested that the reports to be considered at the meeting in March 2020 contain detail on the effect of lockdown and the period post-lockdown on care referrals.

The recommendations below were proposed by Councillor Carole Gandy and seconded by Councillor Paul Andrews and agreed by the committee.

RESOLVED: That the committee:

(a) reviews the 2020/21 work programme at appendix a, discusses any additional items of business or topics for inclusion in the work programme and agrees the changes to the work programme itemised in paragraph 3;

(b) receives and notes the executive response (appendix b) to the recommendations arising from the child exploitation task and finish group and updates of work undertaken in response to the recommendations;

(c) receives and notes the draft executive response (appendix c) to the recommendations arising from the review of peer on peer abuse cases and the amendment agreed by Cabinet; and

(d) notes the recommendation tracker in appendix d.

16. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chairperson confirmed that the next meeting of the committee would be held on Tuesday 12 January 2021 at 1.00 p.m.

The meeting ended at 3.40 pm

Chairperson