

Minutes of the meeting of Children and young people scrutiny committee held at The Council Chamber - The Shire Hall, St. Peter's Square, Hereford, HR1 2HX on Monday 11 March 2019 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor CA Gandy (chairperson)
Councillor FM Norman (vice-chairperson)

Councillors: CR Butler, ACR Chappell, Mr A James, JF Johnson, MT McEvilly and A Seldon

In attendance: Councillor EJ Swinglehurst

Officers: Chris Baird, Liz Elgar, Matthew Evans, Chris Jones and Alison Naylor

56. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Burbidge.

57. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor A Seldon declared a other interest in the agenda item concerning School Examination Performance as Vice Chairman of Governors at St Peter's Primary School, Bromyard.

58. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting on 4 February 2019 are confirmed as a correct record and signed by the chairperson.

59. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from members of the public.

60. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

There were no questions from members of the Council.

61. QUARTERLY REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE AGAINST THE OFSTED ACTION PLAN

The report was introduced by Liz Elgar, assistant director safeguarding and family support (ADS&FS). The following was highlighted:

- In January Ofsted had undertaken an outcome focused visit which had focused on transition from early help to children's social care; operations in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Early Help (EH) Services.
- The inspection had found that frequency of visits and assessment timeliness were improving.
- There were still a lot of agency social workers at the council but a number had been in position for a long time.

- Less children were subject to child protection plans.
- There was still a high level of looked after children but the incorporation of special guardianship arrangements in Council policy was being investigated.
- Better working between EH and Children's Social Care had been achieved which allowed for the earlier identification of children requiring intervention. The earlier identification of children would also have an impact upon the capacity of EH services.
- A draft proposal for the edge of care service was being developed offering intervention for children in the looked after system.
- Work was being undertaken with families in the looked after system with an emphasis upon potential reunification with looked after children.
- The Council had recently joined the regional adoption agency Adoption Central England (ACE).

Members raised the following points in the discussion that followed:

- It was queried how there had been a reduction in the number of referrals to the MASH when it had been confirmed that referrals from the police remained too high. *The ADS&FS explained that the reestablishment of the MASH partnership and the multi-agency audit had resulted in the adherence to thresholds for intervention. It was acknowledged that more work needed to be undertaken with the police to reduce referrals. The director of children and families (DCF) explained that the police made referrals where there was a concern regarding welfare rather than applying the thresholds relating to significant harm. It was a longstanding issue which was acknowledged in the Ofsted letter but the director's understanding was that West Mercia Police in Herefordshire believed it was solely a Herefordshire issue.*
- The reduction in social worker caseloads outlined in the report was raised and there was concern at the contention by Ofsted that appropriate caseload numbers may not be sustainable. It was important that there was effective management and monitoring of caseloads and an update on the latest situation was requested. *The ADS&FS explained that there had been significant improvement in the assessment service caseloads since the visit of Ofsted in June 2018. Social workers with caseloads over 20 were now reported and monitored. It was acknowledged that caseloads in the LAC service were relatively high but action was being taken to address this.*
- The optimal caseload for social workers was questioned and how officers were supported to outline concerns over capacity. *The ADS&FS explained that there was not a definitive figure but it was important that supervision monitored caseloads and the capacity of staff. The DCF outlined the work being undertaken by senior management to increase visibility and ensure staff were able to raise issues.*
- The caseload of newly qualified staff was questioned. *The ADS&FS explained that newly qualified social worker should have half the caseload of an experienced social worker. Support was provided to newly qualified social workers by the social work academy. The capacity of all social workers including the newly qualified was monitored.*
- The improvement to the completion of assessments within timescales was welcomed and it was asked how it was achieved. *The ADS&FS explained that recruitment of agency workers to the CP court service allowed work to be moved out of the assessment team that was appropriate to the court team. This had allowed for the assessment team to concentrate on completing assessments within the timescales. The DCF explained that assessments were part of a whole-system approach that included assessments in the EH service. Cabinet had dedicated money to address capacity and support EH assessments.*

- It was asked what had been the greatest challenge to the service over the previous quarter. *The ADS&FS explained that recruitment was the most challenging element. There were agency staff but if they left there would be gaps and a lack of familiarity on the part of incoming staff with the systems and processes. This was not an issue that was unique to Herefordshire; Shropshire had similar issues.*
- The recent national recruitment campaign for nurses was raised and it was felt that a similar campaign should be undertaken for the recruitment of social workers. It was agreed that a letter would be sent to the local MPs to encourage a national campaign for the recruitment of social workers.
- The success of the EH service and the impact on the capacity of the service was raised. It was requested that a flow chart was produced which showed how EH systems worked. It was queried whether the review of the interface between children's social services and EH had been undertaken. *The ADS&FS explained there was a focus on Early Help interventions. An overarching EH strategy was being developed and better step-up and step-down arrangements were being developed to achieve an effective operational interface.*
- The work required to performance reports to ensure they assisted improvement to social work practice was queried. *The ADS&FS explained that there had been difficulty in getting detail of IRO performance further work on performance in fostering was required. More information concerning assessments completed within timescales was also needed and this information broken down into the relevant services areas for those assessments to have finer detail on performance within elements of the service. A lot of work had been undertaken on performance data and great improvements had been realised in a number of teams however it was acknowledged that; improvement was still required in some areas.*
- There had been an improvement in the timeliness of Child In Need (CiN) visits but the statistics were still poor, it was queried what work would be undertaken to make further improvements. *The ADS&FS acknowledged that the timeliness was not as good as it should be but the figures were affected by cultural issues which undermined the priority of CiN. Work was ongoing to reinforce the understanding that CiN were at level 4 in the thresholds and visits were required. In some cases poor step-down processes from child protection and the recording of data had contributed to the concerning results.*
- The delay to the work with LAC on access to health records was queried. *The ADS&FS explained that this work was dependent upon the involvement of health colleagues.*
- Partnership working and communication between the Council and Health partners was queried. *The ADS&FS explained that the re-established MASH forum and the multi-agency audits had been very useful to co-ordinate with Health colleagues.*
- It was queried whether social workers felt empowered to report faults and concerns. *The ADS&FS explained that an open door policy was provided to staff to see senior officers with issues but not many members of staff had used the facility. Ofsted had heard from officers within the service that there had been improvements and the visibility of senior staff had increased.*
- A member commented that there were concerns regarding planning among health partners for additional health infrastructure required for house-building and population increases in some areas of Herefordshire.

RESOLVED: That –

The committee recognises that the Ofsted outcome letter of the visit on 22 January 2019 acknowledges improvements and that processes have been put in place and actions commenced since the inspection of Children's Services took place in June 2018.

The committee notes that the letter from Ofsted outlines those areas which continue to be a cause of concern and which require improvement.

The committee asks that the next quarterly report focuses on and is structured around those areas for improvement outlined in the Ofsted letter, specifically:

- Application, by partners, of thresholds for making referrals for statutory social work intervention.
- Quality of assessments, including the time taken to complete assessments and the level of frequency of visits to children.
- Management oversight and social work supervision.
- Understanding the experiences of children and families subject to repeat child in need assessments.

The committee also asks that the next quarterly report provides an update on the areas of concern in the Ofsted letter, including:

- Some children wait too long between social work visits.
- The quality of the initial planning for children following assessment or child protection enquiries is variable.
- More needs to be done to improve the way such cases are reviewed and progressed when early help is not improving the experiences of children.
- Further work is required to improve the accuracy of performance information.
- With respect to erroneously 'stepped-up' cases; more needs to be done to improve the way such cases are reviewed and progressed when early help is not improving the experiences of children.
- Further work is required to improve the accuracy of performance information.
- Concerning the recruitment and retention of social workers, it is too early to be assured that they will be able to sustain appropriate caseload numbers.
- The actions arising from audits are not adequately tracked, and some children's cases have continued to drift following an audit.
- Management challenge to less effective practice in some cases.

62. TASK AND FINISH GROUP - COURT JUDGEMENTS RELATING TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The chairperson of the task and finish group introduced the report and thanked officers for a good presentation of the subject matter. The report emerging from the group was clear and comprehensive in its presentation of the issues and recommendations.

The following comments were raised during the debate:

- It was requested that the final report was emailed to all members of the Council and was publicised as widely as possible to show the work that was ongoing on addressing the issues in the court judgements.
- The report demonstrated that decisions made in social services were often subjective and reliant on interpretation. The difficult decisions taken by officers in social services was acknowledged.
- The manner in which the review was conducted over three days was supported as an exemplar for future task and finish groups.

- The report demonstrated that change was occurring and the Council was making progress in addressing the issues in the court judgements.
- The report of the group contained recommendations to the scrutiny committee, the executive and the head of paid service.
- It was important that members of the scrutiny committee formed after the elections was made aware of the issues raised in the report.
- It was suggested that experts from organisations such as the NSPCC should be involved in debates undertaken by the committee and this should be investigated in future.

RESOLVED: That the report and recommendations of the task and finish group are agreed for circulation to the executive and head of paid service.

63. SCHOOL EXAMINATION PERFORMANCE

The committee received a report concerning school examination performance from 2018. The report was introduced by the head of learning and achievement (HLA) who provided a presentation and made the following points in the introduction:

- Overall performance had been good when compared to statistical neighbours.
- Early years had performed in the top quartile of SEND performance but improvement was needed in the performance of free school meals pupils and pupils with English as an additional language.
- At key stage one, free school meals pupils had performed well and phonics was a strength. Development work was required on greater depth in reading and mathematics.
- At key stage two, the performance of free school meals, EAL and SEND pupils was positive. Development in the performance of pupils on EHC Plans was required in reading, writing and mathematics.
- At key stage 4, the performance of SEND pupils was positive but improvements were required in the performance of looked after children.
- At key stage 5, performance in Tech Levels was positive and improvement was required in performance in Applied General Qualifications.
- Details of projects in place to improve performance were outlined including school to school support, the solid roots project and triad work on wellbeing.

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

- It was noted that Hereford Academy and St Thomas Cantilupe were run by the same academy trust and both were assessed as inadequate by Ofsted. Assurance was sought that there were no further schools operated by the trust in a similar situation. *The HLD explained that the other schools operated by the academy trust in Herefordshire were currently assessed as good or better. The DCF confirmed that officers would shortly be meeting with the trust and the regional schools commissioner.*
- It was queried whether assessment of initiatives introduced in schools to drive improvement were undertaken to determine whether they had a detrimental impact on other areas of performance. *The HLD explained that she was not aware that such assessments took place.*
- The dip in performance of free school meal pupils at early years was a concern and the work that was undertaken with parents as part of early help strategies was queried. *The HLD explained that the solid roots project was helping families and working to increase engagement with parents. The project was focused on the home learning environment and parenting skills.*

- The issues concerning the performance of older boys was raised and the broader community and early help support that was required to assist this cohort. *The HLD explained that schools were offering after school activities. The DCF explained that the police and crime commissioner was looking to work locally on methods to engage young people.*
- The performance of looked after children was raised and whether the results of the cohort in the report was part of a longer term trend. *The HLD explained that data was available for the previous three years and due to the small size of the cohort there was considerable fluctuation in performance.*
- Schools understanding of safeguarding responsibilities was raised. *The HLD explained that there would be a quality assurance inspection this year of safeguarding arrangements. Safeguarding formed part of CPD for school staff.*
- How the performance at greater depth at key stage one and two would be addressed was raised. *The HLD explained that the performance was below average and projects were in place to attempt to improve greater depth.*

The cabinet member children and families explained that the report provided a useful overview of achievements and areas for improvement.

RESOLVED: That –

- a. **The committee recognises the positive elements of the report but also notes those negative elements including:**
 - **The general level of development achieved by children eligible for free school meals in the early years foundation stage. A slight decrease is reported but the performance in a national context remains poor;**
 - **The percentage of pupils achieving greater depth in reading and maths at key stage 1 compared to national figures;**
 - **The performance of looked after children at key stage 1, compared to national outcomes in writing and maths and at KS 4**
 - **Disadvantaged pupils performance against attainment 8 and progress 8 measures.**

- b. **The committee calls on the executive to note the importance of the need for a broader working emphasis on socio-economic issues and the connection to school performance.**

64. SEND PROVISIONS TASK AND FINISH GROUP - OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The SEND Provision task and finish group report was introduced by the chairman of the group, Councillor FM Norman, who explained that the group had looked carefully at the changes introduced by the children and family act 2014 and concerns that children with SEND were being allocated to the wrong educational establishments. The group had not looked at home education, this was understood to be a significant issue but one which the government was now looking to address. The group recognised that the numbers at special schools was increasing but whilst there was not widespread incidence of children in the wrong educational setting the group acknowledged that children could be allocated incorrectly.

In the discussion that followed the points below were raised:

- The importance of providing funding for CPD concerning SEND was raised. In the recently approved council budget 2019/20, an allocation had been agreed for CPD relating to SEND for teachers. This would be particularly in smaller schools to help in efforts to ensure good SEND provision.

- It was noted that concerns persisted regarding delays in speech and language therapy. This had been an issue previously and it was disappointing that the problem persisted.

An additional recommendation concerning training in the early years phase and EHC Plans was proposed which was agreed in principle and would be finalised with the chairperson of the task and finish group following the meeting.

RESOLVED: That the report and recommendations of the SEND provision task and finish group (subject to the finalisation and inclusion of a recommendation concerning early years phase – training and EHC Plans) be approved for submission to the executive.

65. PRU REFERRALS TASK AND FINISH GROUP - RECOMMENDATIONS AND OUTCOMES

The PRU referrals task and finish group report was introduced by the chairperson of the group, Councillor MT McEvelly. The group had looked at the number of referrals to the PRU and determined that there was a high level of referrals. The reasons for this high level were considered and were outlined in the report. A series of recommendations relating to possible measures to reduce the level of referrals and other issues concerning alternative provision had been proposed and were contained in the report.

The following points were raised by the committee in the discussion:

- There was concern over the level of attainment at the PRU outlined in the report which fell below the benchmark.
- The level of permanent exclusions was a concern. It was noted that schools were less likely to offer second chances than had previously been the case and children were referred to the PRU. *The HLD explained that it was more difficult to find alternative places for students permanently excluded from the secondary phase particularly in years 10 and 11. The DCF highlighted that the management of the PRU had recently passed back to the Council and the head of additional needs was looking at methods of renewing and strengthening arrangements in alternative provision.*
- The importance of vocational courses for children and the perception of pupils who had attended the PRU of the stigma attached to the facility was also raised.

RESOLVED: That the report and recommendations are approved for submission to the executive.

66. WORK PROGRAMME REVIEW

The committee received and noted its work programme for 2018/19. Two items were proposed for the work programme for 2019/20: pastoral care in schools; and peer on peer sexual harassment and abuse.

The chairperson provided an update on her meeting with Jesse Norman MP at which the outcomes of the dental health and childhood obesity spotlight review were discussed. A meeting was being arranged between the local MP, NHS England and the chairperson of the scrutiny committee to discuss issues around dental health in Herefordshire.

