

Minutes of the meeting of Children and young people scrutiny committee held at Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Tuesday 22 February 2022 at 2.30 pm

Committee Members: Councillor Phillip Howells (Chairperson)
Councillor Jennie Hewitt (Vice-Chairperson)
Councillors: Helen I'Anson, Mike Jones, David Summers, Jim Kenyon (non-voting member) and Toni Fagan*

In Attendance: Councillor Diana Toynbee*, Cabinet Member and Families

Officers: Darryl Freeman, Director, Children And Families
Matthew Sampson, Interim Assistant Director Children's Safeguarding Quality and Improvement
Lorna Simpson, Senior HR and OD Business Partner
Dana Marrett*, Service Manager for Fostering and Permanence Service*
Ruth Madembo*, Interim Head of Service for Care Experienced Children and Young Adults
Helen Bannister*, Deputy Principal Social Worker
Matt Evans, Democratic Services Officer (Clerk)
James Vickery, Democratic Services Officer (observing – in training)
Jen Preece, Democratic Services Officer (technical support)

*Denotes virtual attendance

60. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Graham Andrews, Mr Sam Pratley - Education Co-optee, Mr Andy James - Education Co-Optee and Jane Ellis, Director of Healthwatch

Councillor Toni Fagan attended the meeting remotely and did not vote on the resolutions of the Committee.

61. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There were no named substitutes.

62. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

63. MINUTES

Resolved: It was resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 23 November 2021 and 11 January be approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chairperson.

One of the actions on the action tracker that accompanied the minutes was the recruitment of co-opted Members. Although there were still some outstanding vacancies the Chair was pleased to report to the Committee that interviews for the position of a representative of

families who are or have been supported by social workers had taken place, and in addition, the Archdiocese of Cardiff had nominated their representative as Mr Wiktor Daron. It was hoped that new members would join the Committee at their meeting in March.

64. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

No questions had been received from members of the public.

65. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions had been received from Councillors.

66. WORKFORCE UPDATE AND WORKFORCE STRATEGY

The purpose of the report was to provide the Committee with an update on the workforce stream of the Children's Services Improvement Plan – Phase 1, including an overview of workforce data. During his introduction, the Director for Children and Families highlighted the following points:

- This was the first time that workforce related data had been presented to scrutiny.
- Some of the messages in the report were uncomfortable but the service was working hard to support and develop their workforce which they recognised as their most valuable asset. Children's Services had been rocked by the high court judgement last April which triggered the wave of activity and change that continued today. The impact had undoubtedly been unsettling for staff who had seen changes in leadership and direction, and increased demands on service and performance, all whilst operating in the context of a global pandemic.
- There were a number of locums within the service who had joined in the past year as it had had to increase capacity quickly.
- There were signs that things were now changing; where there had been an increasing number of resignations this had now slowed and feedback from the staff reference group, and from practitioner and management forums, was more positive.
- The Service was focussed on introducing a new range of initiatives which came together as the new workforce strategy. Documents that made up the strategy included the draft retention and recruitment framework, and the draft ambitions paper. Other elements included the support arrangements for newly qualified social workers and a career progression for social workers that would be introduced in April.
- The leadership team was leading by example and working in a restorative manner to ensure that any vestiges of a bullying culture were stamped out.
- The offer to staff in terms of pay scales and benefits was being developed but it was a very challenging and competitive environment in which to attract and retain staff as social workers continued to feature on the UK's national shortage occupation list.
- Mr Freeman reassured the Committee that his role was now permanent and that he intended to see the improvement of the service through.

During the discussion that followed with the Senior HR and OD Business Partner and the Committee the following principal points were noted:

- Phase 1 of the improvement plan ran until 31 March and was about sowing the seeds and getting the basics right.
- It was acknowledged that care staff were predominantly female but although the gender mix in Herefordshire was unbalanced, with only 14 male members of staff to

86 females, this was still a higher proportion of male staff than found in other Councils.

- Newly qualified social workers had a lower case load for the first year as part of their transition. Historically however they joined a team and invariably ended up taking on a full caseload. The new approach meant that they would stay within the academy and have a full year's support before joining a permanent team.
- The service was positioning itself to be more competitive; reviews of job descriptions and the pay and training offer had taken place and in addition retention interviews had been set up to capture and improve on the positive aspects of the role and workplace which had made staff want to remain with Herefordshire.
- In Children's Services, exit interviews were offered on a one-to-one basis with either someone from HR or the assistant principal social worker.
- The external national picture meant there was an increasing need to 'grow our own' social workers.
- Advanced practitioners had been put in place to support newly qualified social workers and their experience had informed this report.
- Online resources for social workers had been enhanced.
- The Council wanted to be recognised as a caring employer who did it all it could to nurture relationships.
- Councillors requested that quantitative data from the exit interviews be included in future as it would be useful to know whether, for example, it was 10% or 100% of employees who had issues around their pay and conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Having reviewed the information provided, the Committee:

- a) Noted and welcomed this first workforce report to the Committee as an interim report, being part of the improvement plan process, and also welcomed the progress being made, including feedback and data from Council care workers and families, as part of the Committee's aim to help improve openness and transparency in line with a "bottom up" scrutiny approach.**
- b) Asked that the detail and information contained in the pdf documents on the Herefordshire Social Work Academy website be reviewed and brought up to date and that the Academy be promoted more widely so that it was more visible.**
- c) Asked that in future the report provides more detail on the issues emerging from the exit interviews and includes a greater level of quantitative data.**
- d) Suggested that to encourage a greater uptake of the offer of an exit interview that there is also an option that they be conducted by an independent interviewer.**

ACTIONS:

1. That quantitative data for the report presented be sent to Committee Members.

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At the conclusion of this item the Senior HR and OD Business Partner left the meeting.

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67. CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT PLAN - PROGRESS UPDATE

The Director for Children and Families introduced the report the purpose of which was to provide an opportunity for Members to reflect on progress following receipt of the non-statutory improvement notice in May 2021 and to consider areas of work for further scrutiny activity, reflecting priority actions.

During discussion the following principal points were noted:

- Demand was increasing significantly in the service and this was placing pressure on teams and capacity, leading to an impact on caseloads and on performance, in some areas. Demand was driven by a number of factors including changes and improvements that the Council was making themselves, the impact of national events and cases that came to the national attention, the impact of Covid and the emergence of legacy unmet need.
- The pressure was particularly acute in assessment teams where caseloads continued to be too high despite initiatives put in place by service leaders.
- Additional supervisory capacity to support effective case management had been added and two additional, temporary teams had been recruited to divert some pressure in the short term.
- Officers were currently working on a refreshed and revised version of the Improvement Plan and would share a working draft with the Committee and bring forward a more formal report in due course.
- As a service, the term children in our care was used more often and preferred, as it re-enforced the corporate parenting duty that the Council had. Other terms such as looked after children were used in a more legal sense. Children and young people had been asked which one they preferred and had not expressed a particular preference.
- An external review of the SEND provision would come to a later meeting of the Committee.
- The Framework referred to in the report was the new performance and information management framework. Historically the service had relied on excel spreadsheets that gave a snap shot of a particular time and date and which invariably, by the time that it had gone through its processes, was out of date. The service was now moving to an on-line system which took data from Mosaic and other systems. It refreshed overnight so was as close to real time data as it could be and would allow managers to interrogate that data and drill down to team and child level. The system was in its infancy but it was hoped that it would eventually capture all service areas and become increasingly dynamic.
- In the last 9 months the service had introduced 5 additional social work teams which was a huge increase. This was all extra capacity to address the upsurge in demand and although staffed primarily by temporary staff there were plans within the service to address this and make the teams permanent.
- On the back of the high court judgement the legal team had been expanded and there was an excellent working relationship between them and senior managers.
- Naturally, the service's aim was to keep more families together but where they had gone to court recent feedback had been that judges agreed with the rationale and decisions behind such action.
- The service had received a £1.7m grant from the Department of Education (DfE) to speed up some of the improvement work. The DfE did not yet know whether there was more money in the pot as they had not yet received their devolved budget but there could be opportunities for additional funding in the future.
- In terms of general performance the Council was one of the best local authorities in the region at providing timely educational health and care plans, and statements.
- Children that came in through the MASH (Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub) needing an assessment were seen by a social worker within 5 working days of the referral.
- There were many more pathways available in schools to refer in to mental health services.
- It was important that anyone applying for a job with the Service knew what the philosophy of management was and how relationships were managed within the social work team.

The following recommendations were proposed and seconded and carried unanimously.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Committee recommended that:

- a) An overview of the amended improvement plan be presented at a forthcoming workshop, focussing on the framework activities for performance and management;
- b) A report on the outcomes of the external peer review of SEND provision be allocated to a forthcoming meeting, as soon as available;
- c) A report giving detail of the access of social workers to legal advice and support when undertaking casework be provided to the Committee at a future meeting and
- d) In future the report reflects how relationships are positively managed with staff in line with management philosophies and that these are more widely advertised as a unique selling point in recruitment strategies.

ACTION:

1. The Director for Children's Services would provide the Committee with the data on how long it took to get a statement of education need.

68. FOSTERING SERVICE UPDATE

The Service Manager for Fostering and Permanence Service gave a presentation (appended to the minutes) to introduce the report, the purpose of which was to review the performance of the Fostering Service as outlined in the Annual Report attached at Appendix A.

During discussion the following principal points were noted:

- The Quality Assurance Framework for Foster Panel was a new initiative but all other areas of fostering work underwent quality assurance.
- A fostering panel handbook was being developed which would encompass best practice from other authorities. This included the selection process and how long members would be in post for, usually 3-5 years.
- Foster Carers could be de-registered if for example they retired or left the country but on a rare occasion it could be the Local Authority who applied to de-register them based on safeguarding concerns.
- The service needed to recruit more people to the foster panel not only to increase the numbers but also to increase diversity. Additionally, because the target for in-house foster carers was moving from 15 to 25 it was likely to mean a move to 2 panels. A rolling advert was being put out asking for those interested in sitting on a Foster Panel to submit an expression of interest.
- It was best practice to have elected Members on a fostering panel and the Director for Children Services asked that Scrutiny champion this with full Council.
- The Council wanted to offer more children in its care a family based placement and therefore had set itself an ambitious target to recruit more foster carers.
- The service also wanted to reduce its reliance on independent fostering agencies not only because of the cost implication but also because there were none within Herefordshire so children were placed outside of the area.
- There was a marketing and recruitment strategy in place and the Service was also looking at commissioning a digital market expert to target the right audience and help improve the conversion rate from enquiries to approval.
- Ideally it would be preferable to have two or three councillors sitting on the fostering panel so that the work load and time commitment could be shared.

- There had been 6 foster to adopt placements in the last year and the service was hoping to improve on this

The following recommendations were proposed and seconded and carried unanimously.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Committee reviewed and accepted the Fostering Service Annual Report April 2020-March 2021 and recommended that:

- a) The Committee promotes the opportunity for elected members of the Council to sit on the Fostering Panel and encourages nominations from current councillors;**
- b) Officers from the Fostering Service provide their assessment of the challenges and opportunities for improvement that exist in the Service.**

69. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Director for Children and Families introduced the report the purpose of which was to provide members of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the range of performance and management information available to managers across the Children and Young People Directorate.

During discussion the following principal points were noted:

- Where some of the performance appeared poor it was in part because the expectations and parameters had changed; for example children that were subject to a child protection plan were now visited more frequently. It would take a few months for this to level out and accurately reflect direction of performance.
- The service was not seeing a significant rise in the rate of which children came into care but there were fewer approaching their 18th birthday and leaving which created a net increase.
- Councillors had previously discussed with officers, and at their workshops with the LGA, their need for training in order to improve their analysis of reports.

The following recommendations were proposed and seconded and carried unanimously.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Committee received and approved the Children's performance report and recommended that:

- a) A workshop development session on understanding and analysing the Safeguarding and Family Support Scorecard be scheduled; to include an overview and examination of other data sets used by the Committee and with a narrative to support the presentation of data.**
- b) The current report be used as a bench mark against which the performance of the service will be judged during the course of the year.**

70. WORK PROGRAMME REVIEW

The Committee reviewed the draft work programme for 2021/22 and agreed the following:

AGREED:

- That that the next meeting on 22 March would have a mental health focus.
- That the Chair and Vice-Chair, along with any other members of the Committee that wished to attend, hold a business planning session with officers to look at agenda items for the meetings of the next municipal year. The session would also include a review of outstanding actions from this year.

71. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as Tuesday 22 March 2022 at 2.30pm.

The meeting ended at 5.30 pm

Chairperson

