

## **Children's Standing Overview Group**

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The Children's Standing Overview Group (CSOG) of the People's Scrutiny Committee meets bi-monthly to review performance/service matters relating to children's safeguarding and social care services respectively. At the last session on the 27 April 2016 the following issues were raised:

### **Technology and Functionality Provided to Children's Social Work**

- Following the conclusion of the Lean Review in 2015 the number of forms social workers had to complete on Care First was reduced, which has made a significant difference to staff.
- The need for a single system for children, not just for Children's Social Care, but one that also interfaces with Adult Services, Health and most importantly across Education.
- Staff migration will continue to be a big challenge to the Council and represents a costly piece of work to address. The reduction in the forms that need to be completed within Care First is one piece of the puzzle to help address the issue of migration.
- Skype Business will shortly be available to all parts of the County Council.
- Members thanked the Cabinet Member for Performance & Engagement and the Head of Business Strategy and Support for the considerable progress made since the 2013 Ofsted.

### **Performance Report: Children's Social Work and Child Protection**

- Concern about the inappropriate use of Devon Assessment Framework (DAFs).
- The challenge of academisation, and concerns around consistency.
- The need to reduce social worker caseloads, as currently these are at an unacceptable level.
- Thresholds are not yet right at almost every stage of the system. The system in Devon has not properly addressed all the intermediary steps prior to a Child Protection conference.
- Placement stability is a huge challenge.
- Need to articulate a vision for Children's Social Care as to how it should look. The Team Manager position is absolutely crucial in the articulation of this vision.
- There needs to be adequate resistance within the system and social workers need to feel safe.
- Need to protect resource for early help. Early help may be the only place to get additional money out of the budget but it is not a sensible area to cut, and will risk higher end costs.
- Parents will struggle with the current system in terms of SEND and is an area for development.
- There is a significant difficulty accessing specialist mental health support services for the most vulnerable. There is little evidence of whole system CAMHS thinking.

## Site Visits to Newton Abbot, Totnes and Exeter Social Care Offices

CSOG members undertook site visits to Newton Abbot and Totnes social care offices on 26 April 2016 and met staff from the Exeter offices on 27 April 2016. Members found through their site visits that considerable improvements had been made since their last visits in 2014 and thanked all concerned.

During discussion with a wide range of Children's Social Care staff the following issues were however raised:

- Staff spoke of the improvements in IT and mobile technology. The reduction in Care First forms has certainly been of benefit. There are difficulties in Devon in terms of mobile networks and internet connections but IT support is good.
- Huge pressure that Child Protection social workers are under, where staff are overwhelmed by their caseload and are leaving after a short period of time.
- The need to recruit more permanent staff in Child Protection. It remains a problem where agency staff leave in terms of disruption and gaps, which is at the detriment of the service and ultimately the children concerned. It is a difficult part of the business and there needs to be more support going into the teams to improve the consistency of workers. AYSEs and other staff are not always leaving to get more money elsewhere but to move into another area of work which is less pressured. It is difficult to escape the worry 'that you have not done enough to keep a child safe'. Staff in Child Protection are often working at nights at home, at weekends and cannot use up their toil and have significant difficulties taking leave.
- Staff that remain in post often feel isolated with people leaving around them. One member of staff advised that after only 12 months she was the longest serving member of staff in her team.
- Caseloads are going up. Some staff are doing 60/70 hours per week. An AYSE advised that she had a caseload of 26 while also having to find time to do coursework – she also did not feel that she was being given the appropriate level of support from her line manager.
- Cases though are moving through the system and are not being re-referred which is a good sign.
- Not enough experienced staff, with some of the more experienced staff moving to become agency workers. Agency staff are in some instances earning £20,000 a year more to undertake the same job as a member of County Council staff. Agency staff reported not being able to afford the drop in pay it would necessitate by joining the County Council on a permanent contract.
- Management pay is less in Devon than neighbouring authorities. Members highlighted the need for a peninsula approach to social work pay scales to reduce the movement of staff from Devon elsewhere.
- Early help is not embedded as well as it might be yet.
- The MASH remains inconsistent.
- A lot of people move to Devon because of its AYSE scheme, which was widely reported as outstanding.
- Vital to have balance though between AYSEs/NQSWs and experienced staff. Positive initiative to bring older social workers back into work to utilise that experience.
- One social worker advised that she had received 2 supervisions in April, but prior to this she had not had supervision for more than 5 months. The quality of supervision is also an issue.
- The hot desking policy dislocates a team and its' manager. The loss of reassurance of being near your line manager is quite significant in terms of feeling properly supported.
- There are difficulties in terms of getting support for children subject to a Child Protection Plan without going to Panel. There is a particular gap for children between the ages of 6-11, all the support is provided earlier in the system for those children with lesser need.
- Children's centres are largely fantastic though there have been some issues with their restructure.

- In terms of fostering, there has been really good early performance, fewer placement moves, and a successful foster to adopt scheme. It was however a mistake last year when for a period the County Council stopped recruiting for foster carers.
- Private fostering feels in safe hands, although given the size of the team the loss of any member of staff would be significant.
- Car parking is a huge issue for staff at County Hall with considerable time wasted as a result of the difficulties. Social workers need to have a car available for Section 47 visits, yet there are no allocated spaces or access provided. There are duty passes but these do not provide access to the car park once it is full, which it generally is by 9.00am and staff are not allowed to use the visitor's car park. It makes working life even more stressful than it already is. The parking arrangements put off social workers from working for the County Council. Approximately 50 spaces are needed to alleviate the problem.
- There should be some provision in terms of social workers being equipped with a panic button/alarm particularly for those in Initial Response on their first visit to a property. NHS staff were reported to be equipped with a panic button for home visits.
- There is an issue at County Hall in terms of there being only one small room for meetings with clients, which is not fit for purpose. The room is difficult to book and has no panic button facility.
- Communication with schools needs to improve. It is apparent that schools often do not want to hold the risk and are referring DAFs back to the MASH. There is real value in having social workers linked to schools in helping to address these types of issues.

**Cllr Sara Randall Johnson**  
**Chair**