

Children's Social Care Site Visits - Children's Scrutiny Committee



Final Report

23 January 2018

1. Context

As part of members ongoing work monitoring the performance and effectiveness of the County Council's arrangements to protect and safeguard children in Devon from harm the Committee agreed a programme of site visits to Children's Social Work offices in each of the four County localities. Members also visited Atkinson, the only secure children's home in Devon.

The Committee would like to place on record its gratitude to all the staff who gave up their time during the office walk through that members undertook as well as in group meetings. Staff were always keen to engage in the process and councillors welcomed their candour.

Members made following site visits:

- Totnes Children's Social Work Offices (30 October 2017)
- Newton Abbot Children's Social Work Offices (30 October 2017)
- Exeter Children's Social Work Offices (3 November 2017)
- Tiverton Children's Social Work Offices (3 November 2017)
- Barnstaple Children's Social Work Offices (6 November 2017)
- Atkinson Secure Children's Home (6 December 2017)

The findings detailed in this report are by no means an exhaustive list of the points raised with members during the visits; rather they offer a reflection of some of the key themes that seem to be affecting social work practice across the County.

2. Findings

Social Care Offices

Staff Morale

It was evident to members from the visits that staff morale at each of the social work offices was good and appeared outstanding in some instances. Staff felt that significant progress that has been made since the 2013 inadequate Ofsted inspection. Staff were enthusiastic about their work and appeared confident in their ability to tackle the challenges they faced. Staff felt they had the support of senior managers in being accountable and transparent about their work.

Amidst the significant progress, staff were however coping with considerable change. In some areas there has been a high turnover of team managers which was unsettling. The appointment of a new Head of Children's Social Care was likely to bring yet more change.

Recruitment / Retention

There are recruitment and retention issues across Devon, which have been particularly problematic in the South and North, both in terms of permanent staff and agency workers and while progress has been made to the management structure over the last year staff have been affected by this instability. Recruitment and retention difficulties are not helped by neighbouring authorities paying higher rates than the County Council.

The County Council uses a lower proportion of agency social workers now than there have been in the past. The agency social worker pay cap is in place and is being monitored but Local Authorities including Devon, have, from time to time, had to act outside the Memorandum of Cooperation in order to ensure safe service.

Investment in training, advancement and career progression for social workers and family practitioners who it was felt are not always getting the opportunity to go onto the social work qualification training programme, might be helpfully reviewed. Staff felt that there is not enough of a structured framework for professional development in Devon, as they have either have to self-fund to do an MSC in Advanced Professional Social Work, or move elsewhere to be supported to progress. The County Council was felt to be excellent in the first part of its approach to 'Grow Your Own', but does not do enough to support staff in their progress into expert practice or into management (2017/18 saw the introduction of the aspiring managers development programme as well as a programme for all current frontline managers).

Caseloads

Caseloads have reduced, which allows social workers to undertake more direct work with children and families. It does seem that gatekeeping at the front end of business with Initial Response is better, and the quality of assessments has also improved. It is hoped that Early Help will also ease the burden on the frontline, although more resources and better coordination is needed. The assessed and supported year in employment social workers (AYSEs) overall felt that caseloads were largely kept to manageable levels, and are only slowly increased.

The pressure of court timescales can be the key issue for a social worker that takes them to the edge in terms of their capacity, beyond that of caseload numbers.

Multi-Agencies

There is a need for better multi-agency working. Children's Social Work tends to be seen as the lead agency by partners, which of course they are in all child protection matters. However partners may be resistant to playing their part in Early Help as they often see it as an add on. A high percentage of Early Help referrals going through the MASH could be worked on by other agencies, not social care.

Schools

Schools need to be supported to help manage their risks with some finding the Early Help Assessment daunting, while others are really buying into it. Teachers do not always have the training or the confidence to deal with some of the more complex issues. Some areas, (Mid & East and Exeter) have made more progress on developing these relationships and are seeing the benefits in terms of shared understanding of respective roles and responsibilities and the value of a consultative relationship with social care to enable school staff to confidently manage higher levels of need, risk and complexity.

Placement Sufficiency

Placements suitability and sufficiency is an issue, as there is a lack of options, particularly for those young people with complex needs. There availability of therapeutic or nurturing type placements is limited. There are not enough foster carers to match children as well as the Council would want. Some older adolescents have issues with multiple breakdowns as there are significant difficulties finding suitable placements, and specialist support. Some children have to be placed out of County and some at a significant distance.

Care Leavers

There is a lack of supported housing options available to young people across the County. There is some limited support for care leavers in terms of independent living, but this does not always happen and often there is nowhere suitable for them to go. Housing departments in the District Councils across Devon have different approaches, when actually they should all be working to the same framework.

There are difficulties for young care leavers managing the benefits system; as if they make a mess of it they can become homeless. Private landlords can be quick to throw out young people compared to local authority run provision where there can be a good deal more tolerance shown. The creation of an in-house residential care home was advocated that could be something of a 'halfway house' to independent living focus with a strong focus on life skills. It would significantly help those young people who may be at risk to themselves and the community from their risk taking behaviour. Young people's independence needs to be promoted, but the appropriate support has to also be in place.

MASH

The MASH has had challenges this year and at times has appeared to be overwhelmed, with not enough cases being progressed through Early Help. There have been issues in terms of understanding thresholds. Schools, Health Visitors and Police too often have the approach of 'MASHing it', where professionals are afraid that something might happen on 'their watch'. There is still a culture of fear around risk.

Family Practitioners

Family practitioners reported not having a clear operating structure, or protocol. There needs to be more consistency in terms of family practitioners across Devon. Family practitioners are concerned there is no legal standing to their assessments, as well as some discrepancy in the type of assessments they undertake. Staff sometimes feel invisible despite the instrumental part they play in the system.

CAMHS

The extent and seriousness of mental health issues experienced by children and young people is a major challenge. Social workers have lots of experience but do need to have access to specialist mental health expertise. There however remains difficulty with CAMHS availability and their not working with children who are not in a stable placement.

Business Support

Staff feel empowered by Business Support, and were pleased with the move to Windows 10. It is hoped Eclipse will iron out some of the issues with Care First. In terms of office accommodation, staff are happy with the Taw View offices at Barnstaple in terms of their design. It is helpful having all the various social work teams in one office. The open plan office works well, as does the hot desking. Supervision rooms

have now had their glass obscured, but they have not been soundproofed so are still not suitable for confidential meetings / supervision. The heating and air conditioning of the building has yet to be resolved.

Car Parking

Car parking at County Hall is an issue. A huge amount of time is wasted by staff waiting for a car parking space. Even staff on duty are not always able to get in to park which is a frustration. All social work teams are managing issues of child protection and are essential users, who are required to have their cars available to undertake visits every day. This is made difficult when they can only park 3 days a week and when they return from visits they are not always able to get into the car-park or find a space.

The parking permit that allows social workers on visits to park in residential areas in Exeter has been helpful however it is a frustration that staff cannot use these while on visits in the city centre as it wastes so much time buying tickets and claiming the money back. It is a frustration for social workers when they are out on visits and get a parking ticket from the County Council. If a social worker is in court for example, there is nothing they can do about moving their car.

Atkinson Secure Children's Home

Atkinson is a secure home for up to 10 children and young people (increasing to 12 in April 2018) aged 10 – 17, offering welfare only provision only. It used to be called Atkinson Secure Unit and was previously both a welfare and a youth justice resource. It is now Atkinson Secure Children's Home, and has moved away from sanctions and punishments to a therapeutic parenting approach. Young people come to Atkinson for a number of reasons normally determined through court or children's services. A high percentage of the young people have drug and alcohol issues, as well as domestic violence in the family. A lot of young people have been subject to, or are at risk of, Child Sexual Exploitation.

Members undertook a walk-through of the Home and had a meeting with staff during which reference was made to the following:

Costs

The Atkinson costs the placing Local Authority £924 per night; where 1:1 support is required for the young person the cost is £1564 per night. With on-costs, placements can be between £10,000 - £20,000 per week. The average length of stay is 3-4 months. The County Council gets a preference when placing a child in the Atkinson. At the time of the visit there were three Devon children in the home.

Ofsted

Ofsted have just inspected Atkinson, and the indications are that the outcome will be positive. They have to return to inspect Atkinson School as it was closed when the inspection team came but all other aspects of the home were rated as strong good.

Exit Planning

Staff work with Social Care to try to establish a clear plan for young people leaving the home. Exit planning is one of the biggest areas of concern. There is scope for improved transition planning with the multi-agency partners in terms of the young person having a suitable placement to move into, as quite often this may not be case. Transition planning should be over several weeks but again is often not. The success and failure of a young person's time in the Atkinson can depend on these next steps. The overwhelming majority of young people have become much more successful and stable through their time at Atkinson. Anecdotally, about a third of young people return very quickly to their risky behaviours, often these are young people who return to a period of secure accommodation a few times before they begin to settle. As a rough guide, about 60% of young people are still in their exit placement 6 months after leaving Atkinson.

Staffing

At the time of the visit there were insufficient staff to enable the home to have its full complement of young people. A number of social workers and other social care staff from the County Council have volunteered and been trained to work some shifts in addition to their normal working role. One member of staff commented however that it was the most supportive environment which they had ever worked in, and it was not for lack of managerial support that there were currently these issues.

3. Conclusion

An important finding of this cluster of visits was the dedication and hard work of the staff over and beyond contractual arrangements. In light of this Members felt that the management needs to ensure Children's Social Care staff are not just looked after but are truly valued. In some instances staff are working a huge number of hours beyond what they are contracted for, and while recognising the passion and commitment of the staff group, care must be taken to preserve their wellbeing. Retaining the quality workers Devon has and continuing to develop approaches to recruit the best staff is an essential aspect of the County Council's improvement journey. As part of this, there is a need to support increasingly creative responses to the staffing issues such as efforts to recruit workers from overseas, and Devon's excellent transitions programme for staff who have had time out of social work and want to come back to the role.

Members have heard the extraordinary lengths that staff go to work with children and families in Devon, and while that is commended and recognised, what is vitally important is that Children's Social Work is not operating in isolation. A strong and effective Early Help where all the partner agencies work together to support the needs of children, young people and families in Devon is clearly crucial to ensuring that Children's Social Work can maintain the caseloads that enable good practice to flourish.

4. Membership of Site Visits

Totnes Children's Social Care Offices (30 October 2017)

- Councillor Debo Sellis (Chair)
- Councillor Su Aves
- Councillor Julian Brazil
- Councillor Richard Hosking

Newton Abbot Children's Social Care Offices (30 October 2017)

- Councillor Debo Sellis (Chair)
- Councillor Su Aves
- Councillor Julian Brazil
- Councillor Andrew Saywell

Exeter Children's Social Care Offices (3 November 2017)

- Councillor Debo Sellis (Chair)
- Councillor Su Aves
- Councillor Margaret Squires

Tiverton Children's Social Care Offices (3 November 2017)

- Councillor Debo Sellis (Chair)
- Councillor Su Aves
- Councillor Margaret Squires

Barnstaple Children's Social Care Offices (6 November 2017)

- Councillors Biederman (Chair)
- Councillor Linda Hellyer
- Councillor John Mathews
- Councillor Margaret Squires
- Councillor Andrew Saywell

Atkinson Secure Children's Home (6 December 2017)

- Councillors Debo Sellis (Chair)
- Councillor Su Aves
- Councillor Richard Hosking
- Councillor Margaret Squires

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Councillor James McInnes

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