

Report of the Children's Scrutiny Standing Overview Group of 16th February 2021

1. Introduction

The Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group meets regularly throughout the year to consider key updates and pertinent issues from across Children's Services, with the aim of developing Members' knowledge and understanding, and bringing to the forefront any areas which may benefit from further scrutiny.

This report outlines the topic(s) covered at the meeting of 16th February 2021, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

2. Attendance

Scrutiny Councillors: Rob Hannaford (Chair), Debo Sellis (Vice Chair), Su Aves, Frank Biederman, Julian Brazil, Christine Channon, George Gribble, Jonathan Hawkins, Linda Hellyer, Richard Hosking, Philip Sanders, Andrew Saywell, Margaret Squires, and Mrs Christina Mabin (Church of England)

Cabinet Member for Children and Schools: Councillor James McInnes

Children's Services: Melissa Caslake (Chief Officer for Children's Services), Dawn Stabb (Head of Education & Learning), Rachel Gillott (Head of Children's Social Care), Vivien Lines (Improvement Director), Fiona Fleming (Head of Commissioning – Children), Andrew Simkins (Procurement Category Manager) and Katherine Charman (Project Manager).

Independent Advisor: Kevin Crompton

Scrutiny Officer: Charlie Fisher

3. Notes and Actions

The Chief Officer for Children's Services, Melissa Caslake, introduced herself as the new Chief Officer having recently joined the County Council.

3.1 Education and Inclusion Update

Melissa Caslake (Chief Officer for Children's Services), Dawn Stabb (Head of Education & Learning) and Fiona Fleming (Head of Commissioning – Children's) presented on the recommissioning of Education and Inclusion Services.

The presentation re-capped previous information shared with Members and the re-commissioning journey so far. The presentation covered the context of the decisions being made, the current contract, SEND Transformation, the current options for services, and the financial implications of these options.

The information shared was on a confidential basis with Members due to the information being commercially sensitive.

Officers stressed the justification behind the recommissioning of services to work together with the SEND Transformation project to create a better wrap around service that avoids high cost interventions at a later stage. Members praised the reasoning behind the recommissioning of services and the possibility of creating a better service for Children and Families.

After the presentation, there was an opportunity for Members to raise any questions about the presentation with officers.

Member discussion topics:

- Members asked officers about when scrutiny will be able to see the improvements made from the recommissioning of services. Officers responded that the current timetable to integrate services is 18 months to 2 years.
- Members asked officers about the financial implications of the decisions. Officers and the Cabinet Member confirmed that the recommissioning of services is not a cost saving exercise but focussed on better outcomes for children and families while transforming how services work.
- Members questioned officers on the implications on staff and management staff in the event of services moving to the County Council. Officers responded that staff will TUPE across to the County Council and they already work closely with staff in the current arrangements but will continue to work closely with staff in the integration of services.
- Members asked officers about the proposed SEND 'Hub' of wrap around services. Officers responded that the 'Hub' is still in the design phase but would be centred on local areas.

Officers outlined the next steps of the process to Members to ensure Members will be involved in the process.

3.2 Ofsted Improvement Update

The Chief Officer for Children's Services and the Improvement Director updated Members on the improvement of Children's Services following the Ofsted Inspection in 2020.

The Chief Officer began by praising the work already undertaken by staff to address the problems identified.

The presentation comes around a year after Ofsted finished their inspection and subsequently graded Children's Social Care Services as inadequate. Improvement has been delivered alongside responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The presentation covered the recent updates and developments in the Improvement journey focusing on the three Practice Priorities based from the Ofsted report – Children at risk of neglect, Permanence for Children in Care and Accommodation and Support for Care Leavers.

The Improvement Director reported on the progress that had been made in the Practice Priorities such as improved legal decision making, improved social work practice and evidence gathering in legal proceedings, better recording of permanence plans for the majority of children in care and earlier permanence planning, particularly for younger children. In addition, progress was being made on improving relationships with care leavers and senior management oversight on care leavers.

In addition, the Improvement Director reported on the continuing risks and challenges for the service. This included high rates (32%) of repeat child protection plans, higher rates of young children in residential care and some care leavers still in emergency/unsuitable accommodation, although this is a very small minority.

A challenge for the service was ensuring there is a stable workforce. Officers reported on the high turnover of staff, the high vacancy rates in some teams and the high proportion of agency workers. Whilst there has recently been a recruitment campaign and improved terms and conditions, the third national lockdown means it is challenging to recruit staff. This means the impact of the improved offer has yet to be realised.

After the presentation, there was an opportunity for Members to raise any questions about the presentation with officers.

The discussion with officers focused on staff recruitment and retention. Devon continues to lose social workers, primarily to Torbay Council due to better terms and conditions offered by Torbay. The Head of Children's Social Care reported that officers were looking at exit interviews from leavers to feed into the recruitment campaign. Members highlighted recruitment and retention has been an ongoing issue and continues to be a worry for the Committee. Members questioned whether the County Council should benchmark its conditions to Cornwall rather than Torbay.

The Chief Officer reported that the social worker workforce is limited in the South West and we needed to work with other local authorities to develop a local workforce. She stated that the issues around recruitment and retention have been raised with the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council and she would be raising it at an upcoming meeting with regional Directors of Children's Services.

4. Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Children's Standing Overview Group is scheduled for Thursday 8th April 2021 at 10.30am.

The meeting began at 10.30am and ended at 12.22pm

Councillor Rob Hannaford
Chair of the Children's Scrutiny Committee