

Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group of Thursday 29th July 2021

1. Introduction

The Standing Overview Group of the Children's Scrutiny Committee meets regularly as an informal information sharing and member development session where issues are presented to the councillors to raise awareness and increase knowledge. The Standing Overview Group considers key updates and pertinent issues from across different services, with the aim of developing Members' knowledge, and bringing to the forefront any areas which may benefit from further scrutiny.

Any action points arising from the sessions are reported back to the next formal Committee meeting.

This report outlines the topic(s) covered at the meeting of Thursday 29th July 2021, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

2. Recommendation

The Children's Scrutiny Committee accepts this report as an accurate record of the meeting and agrees the outlined actions raised during the discussion including any addition of the highlighted issues of concern to the future work programme.

3. Attendance

Scrutiny Members: Councillors Rob Hannaford (Chair), Su Aves, Janet Bradford, Julian Brazil, George Gribble, Jonathan Hawkins, Linda Hellyer, Frank Letch, Lois Samuel and Margaret Squires.

Cabinet Member for Children and Schools: Councillor Andrew Leadbetter.

Councillors also in attendance: Councillor Andrew Saywell (Cabinet Member for Organisational Development, Workforce and Digital Transformation).

Children's Services Officers: Melissa Caslake (Chief Officer for Children's Services) and Vivien Lines (Interim Head of Children's Social Care).

Special Advisor: Kevin Crompton

Scrutiny Officer: Charlie Fisher

4. Summary of Discussion and Actions

4.1 Ofsted Focused Visit

Melissa Caslake, Chief Officer for Children's Services, and Vivien Lines, Interim Head of Children's Social Care, gave an overview of the Ofsted focused visit letter and the 'current position' briefing paper circulated to committee members.

The focused visit, which took place in May 2021, was a temperature check inspection on Children's social care services and no judgement was given on our performance. Ofsted reported on some strengths and positives such as our partnership working in response to COVID-19, School attendances, keeping Elective Home Education (EHE) children safe, improvements in pre-proceedings works, improved relations with the judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) and an improved strategic focus to care leavers.

Ofsted commented that our Improvement Journey is still at an early stage, with outcomes for some children still being 'poor'. There are issues with variable social work practice, plans for children, workforce instability and decision making within the MASH. Ofsted also commented that scrutiny and challenge from both elected members and within the whole council needs to be more effective.

Member discussion points:

- Average Caseloads for Social Workers – Members raised concerns about the average cases held by Social Workers, which has increased recently, with some holding more than 30 cases. Members wanted a future performance report to include data about the caseloads social workers have across the different types of roles. Officers agreed to do this and stated that caseloads and pressure on social workers is a real problem now with 30 vacant posts. There have been some short-term measures in place to create capacity in the system and the business case on recruitment and retention is part of a longer-term plan to remedy this.
- Eclipse IT system – Members asked about the robustness of the system that social workers used. Officers stated they are reviewing how it is working to improve functionality and reduce bureaucracy. Business Support Officers as part of the business case will help reduce the administration work Social Workers do on Eclipse and they will look to add additional capacity in the system as part of the 2022/23 Budget considerations.
- 'Unknown unknowns' – Members questioned whether the Chief Officer and Cabinet Member were able to give assurances they have line of sight on every issue. The Chief Officer stated that no one could be 100% sure of this and the current position of the service (high caseloads, workforce instability) means that she cannot give that guarantee. Since the January 2020 inspection, The Chief Officer assured Members the services knows more about their own situation and have put in 'Need to Know' processes to escalate issues to Senior Managers but this does not take into account human behaviour.
- MASH and decision making – Members asked about the decision-making processes in the MASH and the focused visit letter comment about the Initial Response Teams (IRT) overturning MASH decisions. Members asked if Officers have reviewed these cases and how to ensure it does not happen. Officers stated a number of actions had been taken to move to a better process model like Leeds City Council and a MASH Action Plan can be brought to a future meeting. Officers assured Members the cases had been reviewed and discussed with Members how decisions get made and the philosophy to intervene at the lowest possible level. Officers wanted reflective discussions about decisions that are being made with some healthy debate amongst teams to ensure strongest decisions are being made. Scrutiny Councillors have met with the MASH team and will continue to meet with them to ensure oversight in the service.
- Consistency of Practice – Members questioned the comments made by Ofsted about the consistency of practice by social workers. Officers responded that we were not

'closing the loop' where we had inconsistent practice and why. The Improvement and Challenge Board is becoming clearer on how we drive progress and there will be a change in the score card on how it reports on indicators and performance information will be coming to Scrutiny Committee in September. Officers stated that all teams need to have good practice but also be able to be flexible to local needs. The focus is on the outcomes for children.

- Culture and staff training – Members raised questions about the culture within the service to share issues and escalate problems to Senior leaders. In addition, the capacity of front-line staff to undertake training and professional development to create a better culture for the service. Leeds (as our Partners in Practice) will offer as many sessions as we need as part of the c.500 days they are funded to spend with us. Officers were happy to update Members on these plans and programmes once finalised.
- Scrutiny and Challenge – Members commented on the line in the letter about scrutiny and challenge. Members stated this was not necessarily a reflection of this committee but the wider council. Members discussed ensuring they see the issues that concern officers and having those honest conversations with officers. In addition, Members discussed being more forceful in resolving those issues and commented on stepping up to the challenge to deliver a better service.

4.2 Recruitment and Retention Business Case

Vivien Lines presented on the upcoming Recruitment and Retention Business Case, titled 'A culture for change in children's social care'. The business case is expected to be presented to Cabinet on Wednesday 8th September 2021.

Vivien gave an overview of the aims and ambition of the business case, the context and need for it and the proposals contained within it. The business case included a range of salaried measures, non-salaried measures and no-cost initiatives to the terms and conditions of social workers in Devon. Social worker salaries would be matched to Cornwall and a Retention payment would make our offer better than Cornwall's offer. Officers want Cabinet to approve option 3 which included these measures. The measures also included recruiting extra business support officers and family practitioners to free up Social workers, paying for registration fees, overseas recruitment, expanding the social work academy, more bursaries and apprenticeships, increasing the relocation offer and recruiting dedicated staff on social worker recruitment.

Melissa Caslake briefed Members on the two newly recruited Deputy Chief Officers, Dr Lisa Bursill (Head of Children's Social Care) and Janet Fraser (Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing) and stated she was looking forward to introducing them to Members in the near future.

Member discussion points:

- Members were positive about and welcomed these measures but commented that some of these proposals have been asks from Scrutiny for a number of years. For example, matching our offer to Cornwall's offer. In addition, salary increases, development opportunities and paying for leave to remain applications for social workers recruited from overseas were recommended as part of the Social Work Workforce Spotlight Review from 2020.

- Members asked if the culture at Devon County Council meant Children's Services did not get enough resources. Officers and Members discussed the need to be more persuasive with Cabinet and Leadership Group when making recommendations for resources. We also need to show what we do with extra resources and investments.
- Members discussed what else could attract or deter potential social workers coming to work in Devon. Members discussed the lack of affordable housing and those who are District and County Councillors liaising with their district councils on housing for social workers as key workers. Officers stated that proposal would be very welcome. Members indicated they could hold initial conversations with their district councils on the issue.
- Officers confirmed that the business case (and option 3) would make our offer better than the conditions Cornwall currently offer. However, there is a national shortage of social workers and this is particularly acute for the South West. Members discussed lobbying our Members of Parliament on a national campaign to encourage people into the profession akin to teaching and caring campaigns.
- Members asked if any of the agency staff had been approached to move permanently to Devon. The Chief Officer confirmed a small number had but they are having conversations about this and ensuring agency staff know the benefits of working for Devon County Council such as permanency and joining the local government pension scheme.

5. Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Children's Standing Overview Group is scheduled for October 2021.

The meeting began at 2.02pm and ended at 4.00pm

Councillor Rob Hannaford
Chair, Children's Scrutiny Committee

Electoral Divisions: All

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Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

Background Paper	Date	File Reference
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