

Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group of Monday 11th October 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 Monday 11th October 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

Children's Scrutiny Committee Members: Councillors Rob Hannaford (Chair), Philip Sanders (Vice Chair), Su Aves, Janet Bradford, Julian Brazil, Phil Bullivant, George Gribble, Linda Hellyer, Frank Letch, Lois Samuel, Margaret Squires and Mrs Christina Mabin.

Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools: Councillor Andrew Leadbetter.

Children's Services Officers: Melissa Caslake (Chief Officer for Children's Services), Vivien Lines (Interim Head of Children's Social Care), Dawn Stabb (Head of Education and Learning), Victoria Bendle (Senior Policy and Executive support Officer), Julia Foster (Senior Manager - SEND), Rachel Nall (Principal Social Worker), Kate Jones (Team Manager, Permanency and Transition, Southern Locality), Claire Bagnall (Newly Qualified Social Worker, North Locality) and Nicholas Crippa (Early Help Review Senior Lead).

Special Advisor: Kevin Crompton

Scrutiny Officer: Charlie Fisher

4. Summary of Discussion and Actions

4.1 Ofsted Improvement Plan Monitoring

Melissa Caslake, Chief Officer for Children's Services, and Vivien Lines, Interim Head of Children's Social Care, updated Members on the Ofsted Improvement Plan.

Officers updated Members on the next stage of the Improvement Plan, which is now in its fourth stage. This plan related to the conditions of practice to enable high quality practice

and better outcomes for children across the social care system. The improvement plan focused on delivering systemic improvements centred on four strategic priorities:

1. Voice and Influence of children, young people and families
2. A stable, highly skilled and permanent workforce
3. Work restoratively to support families to create sustainable changes that lead to good outcomes for children.
4. Effective management and leadership creating system-wide high ambitions and expectations for all children and young people.

The Phase 4 Improvement Plan gave details on these four strategic priorities, the service's vision, their outcomes and rationale and the 109 actions that will be implemented to achieve the vision. The report gave an overview of where the service currently rates its progress, some key achievements in recent months and some of the challenges at the time of the meeting. In addition, Members were sighted on a timeline of expected improvements from August 2021 to April 2023.

Officers reiterated to Members that the child is at the heart of everything the service does, and the service is focused on making a difference to children's lives.

Members welcomed this updated Improvement Plan and discussed the following with Officers:

- Members raised concerns with the Improvement Partnership Board's rigour and challenge and challenged the overall pace of improvement. Officers acknowledged these concerns and highlighted that the Chair of the Board has revised the terms of reference and is hoping to see stronger engagement from partners on the board. Officers stated that the journey from 'Inadequate' to 'Good' is not a quick fix and is a four-year plan, considering the Council has been 'Inadequate' for most of the last decade. Officers are focused on delivering systemic change which takes time to progress and to implement. An example was the recent Recruitment and Retention Business Case which invested £4m into the service, which took months of work to create and now needs to be successfully implemented.
- Members also questioned the differences between the Improvement Challenge Board and the Improvement Partnership Board and what the Improvement Challenge Board is currently telling us. Officers responded that the Challenge Board looks on a service level to drill into performance, track key indicators and compares performance across the four localities in Devon. It sits underneath the Improvement Partnership Board. In response to a question, Members and Officers discussed the effectiveness of the Improvement Partnership Board.
- Members asked officers more about the priority of ensuring the voice of children is heard. Officers responded that there is an action plan to ensure this but shared the view of the importance of hearing from children. The Participation team regularly work with children and the service is looking at how the service engages with Children. An example of responding to feedback from children was that Independent Reviewing Officers have started writing outcomes of review meetings in a child friendly letter, sent to the child, to connect with children in a different way.
- Members shared feedback on the Bridges Service, with comments stating it is "the best thing ever" but wanted to clarify the level of support given to families after 6 months. Officers were pleased to hear the feedback and commented that some families will need continue to need support after the 6 months working with Bridges.

- Members asked officers if the 109 actions were feasible and if the service could achieve them all. Officers accepted that it was a long list, but each action was something that needed to happen
- When asked about future Ofsted inspections, Officers responded that a future monitoring visit is expected in January 2022 and could focus on our front door arrangements. Officers appraised Members of the current pressures on the service: caseloads are too high and pressure on staff to do their job plus all the extra improvement related work is high and there is inconsistency in the quality of management oversight and supervision. While the service will not be perfect by January, the service is expecting to receive comments on where the service have made progress such as permanent leadership team appointments, recruitment and retention investment and restorative practice developments.

Members and Officers referred to a future Performance Reporting 'Roundtable' Masterclass on 17th November which will look at enabling Members to make the best use of existing data and KPIs, most of which are either statutory reports to the Department for Education, or are required for regulatory inspections.

Action: Scrutiny Officer to work with the Senior Policy and Executive Support Officer on ensuring Members hear from Children and Young People in their future work.

4.2 Eclipse

Melissa Caslake, Chief Officer for Children's Services, and Vivien Lines, Interim Head of Children's Social Care, updated Members the Eclipse case management system for Social Workers.

Vivien Lines welcomed Members interest in the service on the topic and outlined the report. The report covered the background to the item, the financial considerations, an overview of the implementation of the system, feedback from practitioners of their experience and a detailed list of the planned improvements to the system. Overall, the Council has spent just over £1.7m on the system since 2016.

Rachel Nall (the Principal Social Worker), Kate Jones (Team Manager, Permanency and Transition, Southern Locality) and Claire Bagnall (Newly Qualified Social Worker, North Locality) shared their experiences of the system with Members. It is generally regarded as "clunky", but there have been recent improvements to the system and the support given to social workers to use the system has been improved. Staff have been and want to be involved in changes and suggest improvements to be made.

Member discussion points:

- Members raised concerns about the market share of OLM (the provider) and if OLM can support our needs in the future. Officers responded that the service is expecting OLM to continue to be a viable provider. While the system is not perfect, and no case management system is perfect, Officers would work with OLM to make improvements.
- Members asked about Eclipse's integration with other systems that the service uses and if the lack of integration in some areas is impeding social workers and missing information. Officers responded that there is work ongoing to improve integration with the MASH to get the whole of a child's journey on Eclipse.
- Members asked out the commissioning process and whether the Council got the product it originally asked for. Officers responded that there is a normal process of refining

products and working with providers during and after implementing products. One of the recent improvements is to create a Joint Governance Board to oversee Eclipse and the improvements suggested.

- Members discussed with officers the technology currently available to Social Workers and the potential for tablets or digital devices to be piloted in the future to ensure efficient working. Practitioners who gave feedback to Members highlighted the advantages of using pen and paper to make notes to keep their attention on families and being able to go back through their notes and reflect on them before inputting them into the Eclipse system.
- Members discussed with officers the merit of process mapping the system to ensure efficiency and being able to remove duplication or steps to streamline working.

Members agreed with Officers on the need to continue to make improvements to the system, and understood their concerns that changing to a different provider/system would not be beneficial due to the cost and disruption this may cause.

Action: The Chair and Vice Chair to discuss with the Cabinet Member ways to progress improvements, work with our digital transformation team and discuss extra capacity to allow for process mapping of the Eclipse system.

NB Councillor Sanders chaired the meeting from this item onwards

4.2 SEND EHCP Timeliness and WSOA Update

Dawn Stabb, Head of Education and Learning, updated Members on Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) Timeliness and progress made on the Written Statement of Action (WSOA).

The accompanying report gave Members an overview of the recent history since the 2018 joint Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspection of the local area. The report gave the history of EHCP timeliness on assessments and reviews since 2018, current action to improve timeliness, information on the quality of EHCPs, capacity of the SEN team and an update on the progress made on the WSOA.

The Head of Education and Learning confirmed that there is an imminent inspection from Ofsted on the progress made in the WSOA. Since 2018, and until the start of the pandemic, significant progress has been made on the WSOA and EHCP timeliness, however in recent months, the service has been facing significant challenges and a downward trend on EHCP timeliness. This is largely due to recruitment challenges for Education Psychologist (EP) as a result of national shortages, as their advice must be included on an EHCP it is affecting overall timeliness.

The Chief Officer and the Head of Education and Learning gave an overview of how Ofsted may view are progress. While officers will be showing Ofsted where the service has made progress, the service is expecting them to report that the Council has not made fast enough progress in all 4 areas. Since the 2018 inspection, the Department for Education (DfE) have been in regular contact with the service to support officers.

Member discussion points:

- Members asked for an update on Educational Psychologists shortages. Officers responded that there are recruitment challenges across the education market currently. The move to remote working has meant the market is not as attractive as it once was.

Cost of living and affordable housing in Devon is also a factor in the diminishing number of applications received for jobs.

- In addition, Members asked about how Educational Psychologists are working more efficiently to process more EHCPs. Officers responded that work is under way to look at the format of reports, the quality of reports and working with professionals at schools.
- Members noted that EHCP timeliness had made great improvements in 2019 and 2020 (rising to 73% of plans issued on time in May 2020) but there was a downward trend currently, for reasons already explained. Members asked what else could help EHCP timeliness? Officers commented that timeliness from Social Care is at 88% for this month and Health has an annual average of 57% to date so Education Psychologists continue area which is affecting timeliness the most. The Council has an Action Plan to increase productivity and clear the back log, but this depended on the number of requests for assessment stabilising. There was a high number of requests (198) over the summer, when schools were closed.
- Members asked if the quality of EHCPs were improving and Officers were confident that their Quality Assurance work has improved quality. The feedback from parents indicated this. Officers reminded Members that there needs to be an understanding of quality not quantity over the information in EHCPs.
- Officers and Members discussed staffing arrangements for additional SEN staff, particularly those newly recruited on temporary contracts.

The Head of Education and Learning and the Vice Chair requested Members to read the WSOA Full Update to get a full understanding of the progress made in anticipation of the upcoming Ofsted visit.

Action: Scrutiny Officer to circulate the WSOA Full Update to Members once it has been uploaded to the Council's website.

5. Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Children's Standing Overview Group is scheduled for Thursday 9th December 2021.

The meeting began at 2.00pm and ended at 4.03pm

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