

Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group of Tuesday 18th October 2022

1. Introduction

The Standing Overview Group of the Children's Scrutiny Committee or Children's Standing Overview Group (CSOG) meets as an informal information sharing and member development session where issues are presented to the councillors to raise awareness and increase knowledge. The Children's 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.

This report outlines the topic(s) covered at the meeting, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions. These are reported back to the next formal Committee meeting.

2. Recommendation

The Children's Scrutiny Committee considers 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), Su Aves, Janet Bradford, George Gribble, Frank Letch, Margaret Squires, Lois Samuel and Ms Claire Platt.

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

Children's Services Officers: Lisa Bursill (Deputy Chief Officer - Head of Children's Social Care) and Janet Fraser (Deputy Chief Officer - Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing) and Nigel Denning (Improvement Lead).

Scrutiny Officer: Charlie Fisher.

4. Summary of Discussion and Actions

4.1 Improvement Plan Progress

Lisa Bursill (Head of Children's Social Care), Janet Fraser (Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing) and Nigel Denning (Improvement Lead) appraised Members of the progress made in the Children's Services Improvement Plan 2021-2023 to date. The report included detailed information across all areas of the Improvement Plan. The same report was shared at the most recent Improvement Partnership Board which is why it included additional detail.

Highlights of the report and officer introduction included:

- Since the January 2020 Ofsted visit, we have had three monitoring visits and one focused visit. There is a likely visit in December 2022 with children in care being a focus.
- Matt Dunkley has now been appointed by the DfE as our Commissioner, which represents an escalation from our previous Improvement Advisor, due to the need to

increase pace and progress, the changes to our corporate leadership and Devon's budget pressures. Matt is also chairing the Improvement Partnership Board.

- Janet Fraser (Deputy Chief Officer and Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing) will retire in December 2022 and the recruitment process for a permanent replacement is under way.
- Children's Social Care continues to work with partners in Leeds on improvement and on restorative working. The DfE funded restorative teams are beginning to see impact.
- The service is currently restructuring middle management roles.
- More than 700 staff were able to participate in the Children's Services Staff Conference in the summer. Polls at the conference indicate that staff are clearer on the vision and trajectory of the service.
- The service continues to deal with serious budget pressures and officers across the service are looking at where savings can be found.
- There have been 57 stand up speak up events since January which has heard from 111 young people.

Member discussion with officers made reference to the following areas:

- Closing the performance gap to be closer to statistical neighbours – some of the data from neighbours can be out of date so doesn't reflect current circumstances. Officers are constantly reviewing decisions that are being made. We are also working with partners on level of need and what needs to be referred to Children's Social Care and what can be Early Help or other services. Officers were happy to receive feedback from schools and partners and meet with them where needed.
- We are now faster at responding to referrals and going out to see children and families from 8.6 days to 3-4 days, which is a reasonable response rate. Those who need a faster response are being seen faster (within 4 hours) and the aim is to respond to a MASH referral in 24 hours and Early Help in 48 hours. Officers were going to check how we communicate response times back to referrers.
- Officers are looking at how effectively we are working with children in need, if we are working with children for too long and how we move children to the right service.
- Ofsted visits and frameworks – the framework is based on children's outcomes. Ofsted will look at one area at a time, but Officers need to ensure that improvements is made across the service and not just where Ofsted are looking at. Officers meet on a weekly, bi-weekly and monthly basis on where urgent changes are needed and what the focuses are on.
- Children's Services structure change – the key design principle is about meeting the needs of children and families. Localities will still be used to base staff but portfolios and management will be changed to reflect the county wide services. There will be added management capacity so managers will manage fewer social workers and can focus on quality. The new shape will have less transitions and handovers and better use the resources we have. It will also improve county wide consistency as the line of sight will be clearer e.g. currently assessments sit under many managers across the county and locality teams, responsibility would be move to just 1 manager. The reshape has been shaped around some of the models other 'good' local authorities have.
- Contacts into the service and if that relates to improved confidence in services? – Levels of need are greater now post covid. The level of referrals feel right for Devon at the moment. We still start to see a shift when we think about matching the help with the level of need rather than meeting thresholds. When partners are more

confident, they will be able to hold more risk. The Early Help strategy, Front Door, working with partners and being tenacious with families will help over time.

- How will the Education, Employment, Training and Independence Subgroup help improve NEET performance? The subgroup is part of the Corporate Parenting Strategy and co-ordinates efforts and resources for young people. We do recognise our performance in Devon isn't as good as it could be. NEET performance is a stubborn outlier, and the subgroup will look at the reasons why young people find it hard to get into employment and training and what we can do differently. The voice of children and young people will be involved in the discussion.
- Scrutiny's role in achieving the priorities – Officers stated that scrutiny's questions help to maintain focus and the critical friend role Members play is important. Officers advised scrutiny to keep asking the 'So What?' questions, keep ensuring they understand the challenges and to keep championing children and young people in their roles.

4.2 Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report

Janet Fraser (Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing) appraised Members of the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service. The report covered the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. The information and data point to an improving service which continues to aspire to achieve good outcomes for all of Devon's children and young people in Care. The report gives some snapshots of data including staffing levels, caseloads (varying between 67 to 57), number of children in care (821 in March 2022), number of records produced (2355) and a range of practice based data sets e.g. timeliness and dispute resolutions.

Independent Reviewing Officers are a statutory role to oversee the planning for children and act as an advocate for children. They do not hold cases but each child is allocated an IRO so they do become a consistent figure in the child's life. IROs act as a critical friend to children's social care teams and feed into the wider learning within the system and we can pick up themes and trends from their work.

Member discussion with officers made reference to the following areas:

- The role of the IRO – they are a statutory role and employed by the Council. They are independent from the social care teams and sit in DCC in the Quality Assurance and Review Service.
- Ofsted's previous comments about the service in January 2020 around challenging inadequacies and escalating issues to managers – Officers commented on the progress made since then on permanence planning and being persistent in chasing escalations through the system.
- Health and Dental Checks – It was agreed that the Council would pay for dental assessments and treatments for children where we couldn't get it on the NHS. Our performance has improved by 7% but that isn't enough. But we know that there is a shortage of NHS dentists and there were issues to be resolved around implementation and children on waiting lists.
- The areas for development in 2022/23 – We have maintained focus on escalating where practice isn't good enough. IROs have been integral in our work to improve health assessments and dental checks. We have been working to ensure that IROs have a good standing in the community, their challenge and gravitas and ensure that they challenge in a restorative way. We'd like to see escalations continue to be at a reasonable level and improved practice meaning less escalations. We would also

like to see improved speed of permanence planning and having those in place quickly.

- Escalations – IROs have the ability to escalate issues up through the management scale or ultimately to the courts. It would be a failure if an IRO had to go to the court to challenge us as we would want them to use their influence to come to managers and work out the best outcome for the child.
- Relationships with children – IROs see children before their meetings so at least 3 times a year as a minimum. They meet the family if the family are still involved. Most of the IROs have long established relationships with children because people tend to stay in the role for longer as it's not a frontline team.
- Life Story work – There is some amazing work being done by Foster Carers to create memories. We do need to do direct work with children to help them understand why they are in care but we also do the work that any parent would do – creating scrapbooks, collecting photos, collecting memories. Part of that written record of the child's journey is their record and the notes that social workers collect and write.

Action: Officers to share the Interim/6-month report of the IRO service for this current year with Members.

Action: Officers to report the spending on dental assessments and treatments that has been spent ensuring children get the treatment they need.

The meeting began at 3.03pm and ended at 4:23 pm

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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