

20 April 2020

Children's Scrutiny - Standing Overview Group

Present

Councillors Rob Hannaford (Chair), Su Aves, Christine Channon, George Gribble, Jonathan Hawkins, Linda Hellyer, Tony Inch, Richard Hosking, Andrew Saywell, Debo Sellis, Margaret Squires and Mrs Christina Mabin (Church of England)

Cabinet Member for Children and Schools: Councillor James McInnes

Children's Services: Jo Olsson (Chief Officer for Children's Services), Darryl Freeman (Head of Children's Social Care), Vivien Lines (Improvement Director) and Fiona Fleming (Head of Commissioning – Children)

Independent Advisor: Kevin Crompton

Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services January 2020 - Improvement Plan / Response to COVID-19

During officer discussion with members the following issues were raised:

- The need to respond to COVID-19 through the prism of Ofsted.
- The Improvement Plan has been to the DfE and has also now been sent to Ofsted, with a response expected in the next week. While the Plan has therefore not been formally signed off yet it nonetheless captures and reflects the dual challenges Devon currently faces.
- Children's Services need to be offering constant support in terms of care leavers even into adulthood.
- The impact of COVID-19 on risk factors for vulnerable, and the need to protect this group as well as support the community.
- Officers recognised the importance of accountability to Cabinet and Scrutiny through the improvement journey.
- The need to get help and support to families quickly at the moment. Recognising pressure may increase on families as the length of the lockdown increases. Needs to be continually reviewed.
- The need to bring all staff on board with the Improvement Plan. There are a lot of strengths in Devon but there have also been many instances where vulnerable children and families were not getting the right outcomes. It is essential that when things get difficult staff do not ever give up.
- In depth focus on priority groups identified by Ofsted, on top of that focus on all children.
- Continuing to pay close attention to those care leavers in unsuitable accommodation – this number is reducing all the time as progress is made with this group, along with recruitment in this area.
- Still have small number of children in unregulated provision – working to address this. Fast tracking a number of foster placements.
- Considerable focus continues to be placed on those young people at risk of chronic neglect.
- The clear message to families is that all vulnerable children should be attending school at this time. Working closely with the Head of Education & Learning on this. Officers are working to limit impact of the

most disadvantaged not attending school. Almost all schools reopened after Easter. Local Learning Communities (LLCs) have created additional resilience.

- All children aware to the service have a RAG rating and plans for each accordingly for this time. Members recognised how vital it is that these young people are monitored closely at this time.
- Quality assurance process to ensure confident in judgements social work making. Officers are dip sampling around 400 cases a week. Identifying good practice as well as weaker practice, which they are working to improve upon. The Chair asked that he and the Vice Chair see some of case examples – possibly once a month.
- Responsibility of the County Council to advocate for the most vulnerable in school – expected exam grades etc.
- Early Help is a real strength in Devon. The focus is on what support families need to get through the crisis and put this in place where necessary.
- Increased risk of domestic abuse during the COVID-19 lockdown. Families are experiencing higher levels of stress due to COVID-19. The Early Help system has been mobilised to help those families in difficulty. Often just knowing there are people out there to offer support. Members were urged as community leaders to encourage people to speak to someone.
- Incident Management Teams (IMTs) are comprised of a broad range of partners brought together to focus on different areas such as vulnerable children. IMTs have clear lines of accountability and meet each week to catch gaps in provision.
- Produced dashboard to help track and monitor different groups.

Issues Identified by Members

Members raised the following points in discussion with officers:

- Members highlighted particular concern as to the vulnerability of new-born babies and the very young. Officers reported being extremely mindful of this and were aware that globally there had been some reports of increased incidence involving harm to the 0-5 age group in this time of COVID-19. Social workers were still undertaking some home visits, as well as others taking place virtually.
- Members questioned social worker caseload and capacity. Officers advised that it was similar to pre-COVID-19 levels and caseloads were continuing to fall as they have over last 18 months. Around 18 cases per social worker, slightly higher for personal advisors. Social workers in some instances were however being asked to do a different role with the effect of COVID-19 and work ever more smartly. Although it has not impacted on delivery, there has been increased absence from teams as a result of the virus.
- Concern about the vulnerability of those children not presenting at school. Officers advised that where a child has been identified, the County Council works with the school and family to ensure they are satisfied although for the most vulnerable that may not be enough and children services has to decide what next. Children being seen in school is fundamental to assessing vulnerability. A number of conversations with families will be taking place where children are not attending school – not as yet had to take further action. Some families are anxious about their attending with COVID-19. Children's Services has not to make a statutory intervention as yet relating to non-attendance.
- EHCP backlogs. Officers have identified the risk of further EHCP delays. The lockdown provides an enormous challenge for some young people with ASC. No support arrangements in terms of EHCPs and their timeliness have been stood down as a result of COVID-19. The County Council has however sent a letter to the Secretary of State to relax EHCP 20-week period given the current situation.
- Members involvement in Devon's Children and Families Partnership – want to ensure political oversight is strong and effective.
- Staff are adapting to working at home – using technology. Challenges with internet across the County can present some issues.

- Members expressed concern in relation to those families entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) not getting the resource they are entitled to as the national scheme had offered vouchers where providers were not in those areas of Devon. The County Council has worked to find alternatives or provided food hampers. So far not hearing that families are not getting FSM resource they are entitled to. All families they are aware of are followed up on, but the scheme does rely on families coming forward for help. Members asked that a press release be issued on this.
- Every school needs to be part of an LLC regardless of their designation, including small private schools.
- Risk assessments relating to compliance – most vulnerable children rely on 100% compliance on school attendance.
- The need to work with the Media & Communications Team to ensure messages are getting out there so families in difficulty know where to turn. Members suggested that in addition to traditional media routes, using texting and social media.
- Commissioning. Officers advised that they are currently seeing a lot of resilience from providers – working closely with them, and it is a positive picture.
- Concern from members about vulnerability of those young people who cannot access their education offer currently because of internet issues. Officers advised that these young people would not immediately be classed as ‘vulnerable’ but Children’s Services would support their attendance at school.
- Officers do not have a definite number on how many children should be in school currently but will have this imminently.
- Members asked for detail on vulnerable children across each of their areas.
- The Specialist Advisor noted the quality of the reports provided to members for this meeting. He also noted the reduction at the front door of the system with MASH nationally. Officers commented that there was no reduction that could not be accounted for by recent school holiday.

Next Steps for Scrutiny

Members discussed Scrutiny involvement in the Improvement Plan moving forward:

- The importance of members having continued involvement moving forward, whether that is the Chair/Vice Chair or the wider Committee.
- The need for regular information sharing.
- Members sending information through to the Scrutiny Officer on issues of concern flagged up to them in their area.
- The need for Scrutiny to take a forensic approach to assessing the impact of the Improvement Plan, as well as maintaining a wider focus on Children’s Services response to COVID-19.

Actions

- Quality Assurance. Case examples for Chair/Vice Chair– possibly once a month. **(JO to action)**
- Free School Meals entitlement for families – press release. **(JO to action)**
- Data on current school attendance of vulnerable children. **(JO to action)**
- Follow up session with Chair/Vice Chair/Cabinet Member to see how Scrutiny ensures robust response moving forward. **(JO to action)**

COUNCILLOR HANNAFORD
CHAIR