

# Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group of Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2021

## 1. Introduction

The Standing Overview Group of the Children's Scrutiny Committee or Children's Standing Overview Group (CSOG) 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 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.

The items on the agenda for Children's Standing Overview Group meetings, as per the Children's Scrutiny Action Plan, are strictly related to the Improvement Journey of Children's Services. To that end, the Children's Standing Overview Group regularly receives an update on the service's Improvement Plan and has a focus topic, where a topical or pressing issue is explored in more depth.

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), Philip Sanders (Vice Chair), Su Aves, Janet Bradford, Phil Bullivant, Christine Channon, Jonathan Hawkins, 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), Dawn Stabb (Head of Education and Learning), Lisa Bursill (Head of Children's Social Care), Janet Fraser (Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing), Debbie Raymond (Improvement Director), Victoria Bendle (Senior Policy and Executive Support Officer).

DfE Improvement Advisor and Chair of Improvement Partnership Board: Alastair Gibbons.

Leeds Relational Practice Centre: Gail Faulkner, John Maynard.

LGA Children's Improvement Advisor: Claire Burgess.

Special Advisor: Kevin Crompton.

Scrutiny Officer: Charlie Fisher.

## 4. Summary of Discussion and Actions

### 4.1 Improvement Plan Monitoring

Melissa Caslake, Chief Officer for Children's Services; Lisa Bursill, Head of Children's Social Care; and Janet Fraser, Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing updated Members on the Ofsted Improvement Plan and Monitoring Update.

Officers updated Members on the overview of this phase of the Improvement Plan and the Department for Education (DfE) Improvement Advisor and Chair of the Improvement Partnership, Alastair Gibbons, attended to answer questions from Members. In addition, Members were updated on work with Leeds Relational Practice Centre in the Sector Led Improvement Partnership (SLIP), the ongoing reviews of the Front Door (Early Help, MASH and Initial Response Team) conducted by the service and the findings and recommendations from the DfE's recent 6-month review.

Initially, Members received an overview of the Improvement Partnership and the Chair of the Improvement Partnership informed Members of the new Terms of Reference for the Partnership, starting in 2022. The Partnership will meet bi-monthly to ensure more time between meetings to progress the Improvement Plan. All four of the Improvement Plan's priority are now RAG rated 'Amber'. Recent achievements have been the awarding of substantial grants from the DfE and the implementation of the new senior leadership team with Lisa Bursill and Janet Fraser as additional Deputy Chief Officers to compliment the Chief Officer and Deputy Chief Officer. Overall, officers reported that the foundations were now in place to continue to drive improvement, outcomes for children across the partnership and were optimistic about the future.

The Head of Children's Social Care and the Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing presented to Members on the 8-week Action Plan on the Front Door (Early Help, MASH and IRT). The three areas were look at together to ensure the entirety of the Front Door system was reviewed.

Finally, the Chief Officer appraised Members of the DfE 6 Month review which had happened a few weeks before the meeting. The DfE were positive about direction of travel and restorative approach and saw the beginnings of optimism and confidence going forward. The DfE recognised the impact of the permanent, visible leadership team but raised concerns about caseloads and process driven practice.

Member discussion points and questions raised:

- The communication between Scrutiny and the Improvement Partnership and it's overall effectiveness. This was the first time Mr Gibbons had been invited to meet with Scrutiny and he stated he was happy to continue to communicate with Scrutiny at future meetings. He commented on effectiveness of Improvement Boards in that they initially focus on assurance and fixing the concerns Ofsted have raised but need to move into a different phase of driving improvement and focusing on outcomes for children, something Devon's Improvement Partnership is now looking to do. Other officers commented that for Scrutiny to help the Improvement Partnership, Scrutiny needs to be focused on what is happening in practice and assure itself using performance data. In addition, using the key challenges (e.g., Recruitment and Retention, Caseloads, Quality of Practice) to inform Scrutiny's agenda to ensure we work together with the other governance arrangements and avoid duplication.

- Officers were asked about the successes of the first Improvement Plan and the priorities of the plan going forward. Some of these successes included a permanent leadership team for Children's Social Care, Restorative Practice and the awarding of grants to support this and the areas where Ofsted had identified in their focused visit: care leavers and care proceedings. The Improvement Partnership is now looking at the system wide improvements, rather than fixing the issues in the inadequate judgement.
- In a similar question, Members wanted to learn from our partners in Leeds, what should Scrutiny be looking at to support Officers? Officers from LRPT commented that key for Members to know what is going on is to have dialogue with Officers and ensure regular metrics are seen so Members can see for themselves if things are getting better. In addition, making use of case studies as insights on what is happening in practice. Topic wise, officers suggested pre-birth assessments, the experience of children in domestic abuse situations and continuing to focus on recruitment and retention and affordable housing.
- Members asked about Restorative Practice and if it is the right approach for Devon to be taking? Officers commented there are several value and strength-based models which focus on working with families to help them take responsibility. Devon has started its journey using Restorative Practice and is now working to ensure it is understood, embedded, and delivered. Staff are enthusiastic about using this model and want to continue to work to embed Restorative Devon.
- Members asked for assurances if the 8 Week Plan and Restorative Practice can be delivered and are not just list of wish list of planned improvements. Officers commented that Recruitment and Retention of social workers continues to be a concern and while progress has been made, we still need to bring our agency rate down. Affordable housing is a concern shared by Members and Officers and featured heavily at the most recent Full Council meeting where Members discussed a notice of motion relating to the creation of a Team Devon Housing Strategic Taskforce.
- Evidencing progress and ensuring that Members see the key performance metrics. Officers commented that progress has been made on reporting Children's Social Care data to Committee meetings, but offered further discussion on what metrics, data, audit, case studies, etc. Scrutiny sees at CSOG meetings concerning the Improvement Partnership.
- If the Council and Children's Services are making the most of the work with Leeds and we are getting best value from their time working with us. Officers from LRPT highlighted Devon's energy and enthusiasm in their work, our officers have accepted and acknowledged what had happened and that we are making some good early progress – "green shoots of progress". Devon's officers agreed and highlighted that Leeds had been on a similar journey to Devon and we want to draw on their experiences.
- Our relationship with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) and if we had provided our relationship? Officers responded that it was a significant weakness in our 2020 Ofsted Inspection, but the relationship has significantly improved. We are exploring a practice review with the service to work better together.

*Action: Scrutiny Officer to add Domestic Violence and Abuse to potential future topics on the work programme.*

## 4.2 Focus Topic: Restorative Devon

Debbie Raymond, Improvement Director, gave an overview of Restorative Practice and work going on to embed the practice in Devon. Restorative Practice is a programme our work includes three different strands: working with Leeds Relational Practice Centre (LRPC), the £2.2m DfE Transformational grant to help capacity and funding to explore innovation practice models (Mockingbird and Pause). Restorative Practice is a value-based theory of human change, built on the basis that behaviour is most receptive to change when we work with people in a collaborative high support / challenge approach, building on existing strengths, while providing clear guidance about expectations.

Gail Faulkner and John Maynard from the LRPC shared Leeds' improvement journey from 'Inadequate' in 2010 to 'Outstanding' and the lessons they have learnt in creating a 'Child Friendly Leeds'. The key learnings passed on to Members was that improvement journeys take time, culture and systems need to change and evolve to embed a shared vision and the importance of building engagement and enthusiasm from partners to create a shared vision.

Members were enthusiastic about the future and proposals to make Devon a child friendly county and a fantastic place to grow up as part of the 'Child Friendly Devon' vision. Members recognised the part they needed to play to mobilise the vision, make links between partners and were "excited" to see the vision develop and offered their support to the Cabinet Member and Officers in ensuring we make the 'Child Friendly Devon' a reality.

Member discussion points:

- Members discussed the training of staff on restorative practice and why it hasn't been embedded despite being a Restorative county since 2018. Officers commented that while there was training, the culture of the service didn't support working restoratively. Staff feel knowledgeable on working restoratively but we need to ensure they are able to practice restoratively and not process led practice as they are used to. Members discussed the importance of ensuring social workers were empowered by the training and ensuring they are able to put their training into practice.
- Members and Officers from LRPC asked about their experiences in getting a 'whole county approach', understanding that Devon has multiple tiers of local government, to ensure everyone has children on their agenda. Officers advised Members that the best way to do this initially is to get interested people in a room to start discussions. From their experience, their advice was to start by organising to get interested in a room to discuss ways of helping and allowing it to grow from there. Leeds found that businesses and organisations were very interested in helping and wanted to do things to help the children of Leeds. Organisations and Businesses offer support to different groups such as tickets to sporting events for foster families.

*Action: Members to discuss how best to promote 'Child Friendly Devon' in their divisions, making best use of their current partnerships and links to their communities, local businesses and organisations as community leaders.*

## 5. Next Meetings

The next meeting of the Children's Standing Overview Group is scheduled for Monday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2022.

The meeting began at 3.00pm and ended at 4.45pm

**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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