

Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group of Monday 21st February 2022

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, Christine Channon, George Gribble, Jonathan Hawkins, Linda Hellyer, Frank Letch, 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), Lisa Bursill (Head of Children's Social Care), Janet Fraser (Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing), Nigel Denning (Improvement Lead), Simon Niles (Schools Planning, Pupil Placement and Commissioning Manager) and Victoria Bendle (Senior Policy and Executive Support Officer).

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 Nigel Denning, Improvement Lead, updated Members on the Ofsted Improvement Plan.

The Chief Officer began with a summary of the feedback given to the Council after the recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit on 2nd and 3rd February 2022. The formal feedback letter is expected to be published on 9th March 2022.

Officers updated Members on the Improvement Plan and summarised progress made towards each of the priorities of the plan. Three of the priorities are RAG rated Amber, while "Voice and influence of children, young people and families" is RAG rated Green (on track for successful completion). In addition, Officers presented Members a summary of the measures of change and performance data and compared this to the national average, "good" local authorities, and our statistical neighbours.

Member discussion points:

- Members asked about oversight, visibility and capacity of Early Help – Officers responded that all partners had a role to play in early help and the Council is investing more in our early help services. Ultimately, the service works at trying to get the right help at the right time for children and young people and the underlying restorative principles in working with families.
- Professional curiosity and closing cases down too early – Ofsted found good examples of social workers working directly with children. The current system pressures and demands do create a context of over optimistic conditions and wanting to move families on but our quality assurance (QA) work needs to check us to stop us move cases too early.
- Initial Child Protection Conferences within 15 days of a Section 47 (Child Protection) (60%) – Members were advised that performance has dipped and not recovered, and this could potentially mean we move from a RAG rating of Green to Amber or Red.
- Child Protection and children subjected a previous CP Plan (31%) – Officers are reviewing this on a weekly basis but it will take some time bring down.
- Team Managers – In relation to early help, Team Managers have oversight of cases and report to Area Managers. In relation to recruitment and retention, Team Managers are crucial to the service because they have the time and space to review cases and think through the cases. We need stability at this level because of their role.
- Care Leavers in suitable and unsuitable accommodation – Members asked for clarification on the data and a briefing note on the 29% in unsuitable accommodation with some more information.
- Data – discussion with officers about the data available to ensure Members have line of sight such as contacts to the service.
- Timeliness of initial assessments completed in 45 days (68%)– Officers noted that timeliness has declined, and work is ongoing to improve timeliness and quality. Many assessments are taking place just after the 45-day deadline and officers offered to provide that information to Members.
- MASH Guardian – Officers highlighted that some of the issues relate to how we use the system but confirmed new operating procedures in the MASH and that a new online referral form is due to in place in April for partners to request support. Officers also confirmed that the 'timeout' for MASH staff had been changed, an improvement the Chair and Vice Chair requested after visiting the MASH with the Cabinet Member in November 2021. Officers thanked Members for their input on MASH Guardian.
- Direction and Pace – Pace has significantly increased since the appointment of the Head of Children's Social Care and the Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing. Recruitment and retention is the single biggest challenge to the continued progress.

- Cost of living crisis – Officers commented that this would be a real pressure for families in the coming week and months and we are still facing levels of activity higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Actions:

- Scrutiny Officer to circulate Ofsted Monitoring Visit letter to Members once it is published.
- Members requested a further briefing note on Care Leavers in Unsuitable Accommodation to include case information.
- Officers to provide Members with some more information on initial assessments completed after 45 days.

4.2 Focus Topic: Recruitment and Retention

The Chief Officer updated Members on the current recruitment and retention programme and progress made since Cabinet agreed the package of measures in September 2021.

The Chief Officer presented on the background of the paper, some of the challenges currently facing the service, the highlights of the first phase of the programme, the long-term delivery priorities, how those will be delivered, the second phase of the programme (both recruiting and retaining staff), training and development and the next steps.

Recruitment and retention of staff continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing the service in order to stabilise the workforce with affordable housing and accommodation being a large external barrier to this. The lack of affordable accommodation makes it difficult to recruit agency and permanent staff to Devon.

Positively, the Chief Officer highlighted 168 had taken advantage of the retention payments, confirmed the appointment of a HR Business Partner for the service and the progress made in appointing Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWS) (+23) and Family Practitioners (+23).

Members and Officers discussed the recruitment and retention issues across Children's Services, both in Social Care and Education.

Member discussion points:

- Immediacy of the challenges faced by the service – Members and Officers noted the Team Devon strategic housing taskforce was beginning to look at the issue and there were a number of district councils reviewing local plans in the coming years but raised concern about the immediate challenges now.
- Potential solutions – Members and Officers discussed the possible short-term solutions and pilots including hotels, purchasing property, shared ownership schemes and working with the University of Exeter and working more closely with housing associations. Members were supportive of ensuring that solutions were put forward and considered by Cabinet. Officers advised that the North of the County would be a priority.
- Potential concerns – Members and Officers discussed some of the concerns and risks with potential solutions including ensuring what we offer meets the need of potential recruits including single people and families, the cost of accommodation and the availability of accommodation in parts of the county.
- Members discussed sending a message to staff to thank them for their efforts and recognising the improvements made thus far.

Actions:

- The Committee to write to Children's Services staff after the publication of the Ofsted letter.
- The Committee to make a recommendation to Cabinet at the Children's Scrutiny Committee of 15th March 2022 on the significant barrier that the lack of affordable housing poses to recruitment and retention.

5. Next Meetings

The next meeting of the Children's Standing Overview Group is scheduled for Monday 4th April 2022.

The meeting began at 2.00pm and ended at 3.46pm

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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