

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Thursday, 22 March 2018, County Hall, Worcester - 10.00 am

Minutes

Present:

Mrs F M Oborski (Chairman), Mrs J A Potter (Vice Chairman), Ms P Agar, Mr T Baker-Price, Ms R L Dent, Mr S M Mackay and Ms T L Onslow

Also attended:

Mr A C Roberts, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families
Mrs E B Tucker, Group Leader 2017 Group

Hannah Needham (Assistant Director for Families, Communities and Partnerships), Tina Russell (Assistant Director Safeguarding Services (Childrens Social Care)), Sheena Jones (Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager) and Alyson Grice (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. Presentation handouts for Item 5 – Update of the Children's Social Care Service Improvement Plan – Ofsted Monitoring Visit Feedback and Item 7 - Alternative Delivery Model (circulated at the Meeting)
- C. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 25 January 2018 and 7 February 2018 (previously circulated).

(Copies of documents A and B will be attached to the signed Minutes).

313 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Mr R W Banks and Mr P M McDonald.

314 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

Mr S M Mackay informed the Panel that he had a close relative who was a looked after child in another Council area.

315 Public Participation

None.

316 Confirmation of the Minutes of

The Minutes of the Meetings held on 25 January 2018 and 7 February 2018 were agreed as a correct record

the Previous Meeting

317 Update of the Children's Social Care Service Improvement Plan - Ofsted Monitoring Visit Feedback

and signed by the Chairman.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families and the Assistant Director Safeguarding Services (Children's Social Care) had been invited to the meeting to provide an update on the outcome of Ofsted's third monitoring visit following the report on the inspection of children's social care published in January 2017.

The Panel received a presentation from the Assistant Director Safeguarding Services (Children's Social Care). The following main points were made:

- Initial feedback on the Service Improvement Plan had been that, although it was very comprehensive, there was a need to focus on some specific areas. However, in taking this advice and prioritising certain areas, the aim had been to keep all areas moving forward. Although the initial focus had been on the Family Front Door, there had also been developments across the service.
- The feedback from the January 2018 monitoring visit had been that, although there was still much work to be done, inspectors were able to see progress. Feedback from the DfE Children's Commissioner was that the pace of progress was greater than could have been expected.
- It was important that the service made improvements that could be sustained in the long term.
- The additional financial investment in the service was welcomed and it was acknowledged that this was not easy for the Council to do. However, it was noted that extra money was not the solution to the service's problems and additional staff did not necessarily mean a better service.
- Feedback from staff indicated that they were now receiving good quality management and support but there was a need to ensure that this was recorded.
- In relation to the reduction in case loads, the aim was to ensure minimal disruption for children, although it was acknowledged that there would be some disruption as staff moved on and new staff were recruited. The best social workers often had higher caseloads but this was not a good situation.
- Social workers had now been organised into

smaller teams with one team manager. The aim was for each team to look after approximately 100 to 110 cases. Managers would be in a stronger position to have (and record) conversations with social workers and have oversight of all cases.

- There was a recognition that all partners must contribute to improvement but this was still a challenge operationally.
- The monitoring visit had highlighted that, although the application of thresholds had improved, it was still inconsistent. There was still too great a reliance on agency managers in the Family Front Door but this was being worked on.
- Ofsted had reported that the development of a performance framework was very positive and an effective whole-system approach to quality assurance had been developed. However, the challenge for staff was to do this work alongside the day job. There was a need to build in audit as core business. The service was working to build a baseline of service user feedback as this had not been gathered previously.
- Workforce development remained a priority, with the authority aiming to be the employer of choice for skilled staff. Social workers were now being asked to complete a quarterly 'healthcheck' and feedback to date was positive.
- Phase 2 of the Service Improvement Plan would focus on the things that remained to be done and would be available for Panel Members soon.

Members were given the opportunity to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- A Member informed the Panel that she was pleased to see the progress made to date and she wished to congratulate staff on this.
- In response to a question about the number of changes of staff and managers, the Panel was told that on the whole there was now improved permanency in the locality safeguarding teams. However, one area of the County had been less successful in moving from agency staff and managers were now holding a recruitment drive. This was a key priority, but it should be noted that appointing experienced social workers and team managers was one of the most difficult challenges. Strong permanent group managers were now in place and were attracting good team managers.
- It was acknowledged that performance data was

not always accurate and there were some issues in ensuring that it was updated regularly. It was hoped that the move to smaller social work teams each with their own Business Support Officer would improve this situation.

- Improvements to partnership working were welcomed. Social workers had worked hard to ensure better attendance by all relevant parties at strategy meetings. Health visitor and school nurse attendance was now at 80% and conversations were ongoing about whether some health visitor/school nursing staff should be located in the Family Front Door to allow them to more easily access these meetings.
- It was important to prioritise support for children at the edge of care, whether this was social work support or support via CAMHS.
- It was confirmed that reflective practice was good social work practice, but recording of conversations was not always taking place. The reduction in team size would be helpful in freeing up time for reflective conversations.
- It was confirmed that Case Progression Officers monitored all open cases to ensure they moved on in a timely way. They also undertook key audit work.
- It was suggested that inconsistencies in the application of thresholds was fuelled by anxiety about levels of risk. Where there were real risks to a child there was no inconsistency.
- It was recognised that good quality staff were needed to ensure change was embedded and consolidated. With this in mind it would be important to reassure staff about the setting up of the Alternative Delivery Model. It was confirmed that a major communications exercise would be undertaken with staff to ensure they were aware of what the ADM would mean for them and what benefits there would be for them and for the children they worked with. The ADM would be a vehicle to sustain improvement and would allow a total child focus. It would be important to confirm a senior management structure at an early point in order to give confidence.
- A second Member wished to record their thanks to the staff who were working to drive improvements in the service.
- It was noted that a relatively small percentage of referrals required further support. Given the recent national picture, it was not surprising that there was a level of anxiety about risks to children.

318 Performance Monitoring

It was confirmed that data was recorded at the closure of the social work assessment.

- In response to a question about the number of social workers employed now compared to the number employed at the time of Ofsted inspection, the Assistant Director agreed to provide this information to Panel Members following the meeting. She was able to confirm that in July 2016 the FFD comprised 2 teams of 10 social workers and 1 manager. It was now made up of 6 teams of 5 social workers and 1 manager.
- Although senior managers such as the Assistant Director and Director of Children's Services would probably be known by Team Managers, they might not be known by all social workers. It was suggested that staff on the ground were able to tell managers a lot about the service they worked in. It was confirmed that the Assistant Director met every 8 weeks with frontline staff.
- It was confirmed that there was a good and increasing contribution of schools to strategy discussions.
- It was confirmed that Wyre Forest and Bromsgrove currently had the greatest concentration of agency staff. It was noted that both areas were in the north of the County and had good transport links to other local authorities.
- The Cabinet Member reminded the Panel that there were 2 strands to the improvement work. Firstly there was the Service Improvement Plan and ongoing monitoring via Ofsted and secondly there was the ADM which would provide the vehicle for delivery of the improved services. The pace of change was very high and some partners may be finding it difficult to keep up. The Council had agreed that the improvement work would be a priority until April 2019, although it was disappointing to see varying degrees of interest and commitment from Councillors.

The Assistant Director Safeguarding Services (Children's Social Care) had provided the Panel with performance monitoring data for children's social care for 2017/18 Q3.

In the course of the discussion the following main points were made:

- It was agreed that for future meetings the commentary/analysis would be placed before the data tables.

- It would be helpful to have a breakdown and analysis of where referrals were from. Where no further action was recorded it was not clear whether this may relate to repeat referrals for the same child.
- With reference to return interviews for children missing from home, it would be helpful to have some analysis of the impact of these interviews and, again, whether the figures related to repeat incidents involving the same child. Members were informed that there was a great deal of data behind the figures for children missing from home. There were 3 full time missing children officers working on improved timeliness and a better analysis of information to feed into the strategic group. Having received an explanation about the data provided to the front line staff it was agreed not to add to the data presented to members for this item.
- In relation to Child Sexual Exploitation it was suggested that it would be helpful to have data for previous years in order to identify trends. Members were informed that accurate data was not available for previous years and this data would be used as a baseline going forward.
- It was confirmed that children missing from care figures related only to children in the care of Worcestershire County Council and did not include children who were the responsibility of other local authorities.
- A question was asked about the use of young boys as drugs mules with dealers trafficking them from other areas of the country. There were currently no statistics available on this but they would be dealt with on a case by case basis by social workers. The aim for the future was to bring together an overarching team of experts from different disciplines to improve coordination between partners.
- The Panel had been given data for the percentage of children who had had 3 or more placements in the previous 12 months. However, Members felt that, where the number of placements was particularly high, it would be helpful to know the actual number of placements that some children had and the reasons why. Members were informed that work was underway to support and train foster carers and residential placements to avoid placement breakdown.
- The fact that the number of children spending up to 12 months in care was increasing was seen as

**319 Alternative
Delivery Model**

a positive sign. It showed that children coming into care were achieving permanency at an early stage.

- It was confirmed that the majority of children would leave care at 18.
- It was suggested that it would be helpful to know how many children had had multiple changes of social worker. It was acknowledged that this was a national issue, not just in Worcestershire.
- With reference to placement costs, the Panel requested data for previous years in order to make a comparison over time. It was confirmed that kinship carers would be paid less than in-house foster carers.

If Members had further questions on the performance data following the meeting, they were asked to raise them with the Assistant Director Safeguarding Services (Children's Social Care).

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families and the Assistant Director of Families, Communities and Partnerships had been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on the development of the Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) for Children's Social Care.

The Panel received a presentation from the Assistant Director. In the course of the discussion the following main points were made:

- Cabinet had previously agreed to take 2 options forward: a wholly owned council company and a strategic partnership with another local authority. Members were told that the strategic partnership was no longer an option and the Council would be taking forward the development of a wholly owned company.
- A risk in this option was the perception that this was a form of privatisation. This was not the case; an important driver would be to maintain the Local Authority's value base as the company developed.
- Members were given a detailed list of the services that would be included in the scope of the company. All but 2 of the services (Targeted Family Support and the Placements Team) were also under direction from the DfE. The services included in the scope covered 620 fte staff.
- The Adoption Team and the Young Adults Team were not in the scope as they were part of a

different delivery model and it was important not to undermine this work.

- The Company would be overseen by a Board, with non-executive directors being independently appointed. There would be approximately 9 members of the Board, depending on the skill set of those appointed. The Chair would be appointed in consultation with the DfE.
- Maintaining the democratic link would be a clear principle. It was important to remember that the company would be delivering services on behalf of the Council.
- The Wholly Owned Council Company (WOCC) would be a route to sustain improvement. There would be no quantifiable financial benefits and this was not about income generation.
- Concern was expressed about the high costs of setting up the company. A further question was asked about when the company could be disbanded and whether this could happen when the service was judged by Ofsted to be 'good'. In response it was suggested that, when the service was judged to be 'good', there would need to be a period to sustain this. It was confirmed that improvement work would continue alongside the development of the WOCC.
- In response to a question about what would happen if performance slipped further, Members were reminded that the County Council remained accountable, with the running of the services delegated to the company. It was important to ensure that this did not happen.
- Staff who transferred to the WOCC would retain the same terms and conditions and the same pension arrangements. The Company would be a corporate partner with a strong relationship with corporate support services (with approximately 85% buy back).
- In response to a question about the WOCC's relationship with Place Partnership, the importance of providing high quality support services was highlighted.
- The working assumption was that the majority of the Company's staff would be based at the County Council's Wildwood Offices, as that was where staff were currently based and where the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub was located. There would also need to be locality offices throughout the County.
- The £4.6 million required to establish and set up the Company would be spent on transition and

development costs, including legal, HR and project management costs. This figure may change as the detailed work on setting up the company was done.

- Current guidance was that the Company would be liable for VAT, but the County Council had a commitment in writing that the DfE would meet these costs.
- The County Council was currently in discussion with the DfE about potential funding support. In response to a question about what other local authorities may have received, Members were informed that this was not currently in the public domain, although conversations with colleagues in these authorities were ongoing. It was suggested that Councillors may be able to get information on this from fellow Councillors in other authorities.
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility confirmed that the DfE had been absolutely categorical that either there would be new arrangements which did not require the payment of VAT or that they would meet VAT costs and would continue to do so after the Council was out of intervention. Written confirmation of the position was awaited.
- It was confirmed that the role of Lead Member for Children's Services would remain and the WOCC Board would also include an elected Member. Due to a conflict of interest in holding the company to account, this place on the Board could not be taken by the Lead Member for Children's Services.
- No decision had yet been taken about the role of the statutory Director of Children's Services. This would be discussed further with the Council's new Chief Executive when he was in post. It would be important to ensure that relationships between the Council and the new Company were right as, although the duty to carry out the services would be transferred, the Council would retain the responsibility for those services. A Member commented that it would be important to ensure that there were no unhealthy tensions between the Council and the Company.
- The appointment of the Chairperson would be crucial and they must be the right person for Worcestershire.
- It was confirmed that the Council would set the budget for the Company as part of its corporate budget setting process. In the light of this, a question was asked about what would happen if

the Company asked for an increase in budget, something that may have an impact on levels of Council Tax. This was acknowledged as a valid concern, and it was part of the strategic commissioning role to assess whether budget requests were necessary when level of demand was considered. This would need to be worked through via the development of the contract and the implementation phase, and may be something that scrutiny could have a role in.

- It was confirmed that there would be a year's implementation phase with a shadow Company formed by 1 December 2018.
- Concern was expressed that the decision to set up a WOCC would be taken by Cabinet rather than full Council. It was confirmed that the decision on the actual contract would be taken by Council in due course but the decision to approve the development of the Company would be taken by Cabinet in March 2018. Further concern was expressed that this was a huge change for the Council and it was important that all Members were able to buy into it at an early stage. The Assistant Director confirmed that she would take advice from Democratic Services.
- It was confirmed that Trade Unions had attended staff briefings and would be involved all through the process.
- It was important to ensure that residents had a clear understanding of what was happening to avoid the perception that this was privatisation of a Council service. The CMR agreed and reminded Members that the Council would retain responsibility for the service and would continue to maintain budgetary control and to approve the Company's business plan. It was acknowledged that there was also a staff concern about the perception that they were going to work for an organisation that might not have the same public sector value base. It would be important to bust the privatisation myths in order to ensure staff retention.
- It was acknowledged that an incredible amount of work had been undertaken to get to this point. A question was asked about whether the dates going forward were set in stone and whether there was a fall-back position if deadlines were not met. The relationship with the DfE would be crucial and Members were referred to the development of a Memorandum of Understanding which would set out expectations. The expectation would be that

the ADM would go live on 1 April 2019. However, it would be important to focus on getting it right rather than simply making it happen.

- A question was asked about how the Company would make service improvements, given that it would be staffed by the same people. It was acknowledged that the majority of staff would be the same. However, the Board would have a single, unwavering focus on children and young people and sustaining improvement. The CMR reminded Members that the priority would be to make service improvements and the ADM would be a single focused organisation which should add to this and not detract from it.
- An important message was that there would be no organisation redesign as much of this had already been done and there were no plans for any redundancies.
- It would also be important to look at what services remained with the County Council and ensure that they were sustainable. The Assistant Director agreed that it would be important to maintain a joined up offer and consider the impact on the rest of the organisation.
- In response to a question about the relationship between Councillors and the WOCC, it was suggested that it would be important to strike a balance between allowing an element of independence and ensuring good outcomes. Formally, Cabinet and Council would be required to approve the WOCC's business plan on an annual basis.
- With reference to the role of the individual elected Member, there was a need for further work on this and it was perhaps something that scrutiny could be involved in.
- Further work was needed on protocols for dispute resolution between the County Council and the WOCC in relation to approval of the business plan. However, in practice it was hoped that working relationships would be good enough for this not to happen.
- The CMR confirmed that he would welcome ongoing scrutiny involvement as the ADM was developed.

The meeting ended at 12.53 pm

Chairman