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Comments from Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel – Worcestershire Children's Safeguarding Peer Review

Background to the Scrutiny

1. In November 2014, Worcestershire County Council - as part of its desire to be a learning organisation - invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to help facilitate a Peer Review on its approach to safeguarding children. The Peer Review took place in April 2015. The County Council had previously invited the LGA to conduct a safeguarding peer review in October 2011.
2. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel ('the Scrutiny Panel') considered the outcomes of the Peer Review at its meeting on 25 June 2015 and was informed that the LGA team had identified the following four priorities:
 - A 'back to basics' Safeguarding Improvement Plan
 - Resolving the future direction for the 'Front Door'
 - Implementing a detailed financial recovery plan
 - Review and defining the role of Early Help
3. Panel Members agreed that they would wish to undertake further scrutiny work to consider the Directorate's response to these priorities.

Purpose of the Scrutiny

4. The Scrutiny Panel members agreed to meet in small groups to further consider the detail of the four priorities identified by the Peer Review. Members' comments would then be fed back to the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families in order to inform future work.

Conclusion and Recommendations

5. It is clear that much of the ongoing improvement work and work initiated in response to the Peer Review is still at an early stage and it will take time before improvements will be seen. Therefore, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel would wish to receive an update in 6 months' time on progress against the four priorities identified in the Peer Review.
6. In particular, this update should include:
 - Progress against the 10 standards in the Safeguarding Improvement Plan;
 - Details of the implementation of the Safeguarding Quality Assurance Framework;
 - Progress on the development of the scope and action plan for the Family Front Door;
 - Further feedback from the data analysis of the success of the Family Front Door Programme and any resulting action;
 - Progress on the development of the Early Help Strategy as part of the Prevention and Intervention Strategy.

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- Progress on discussions with Early Help Providers about the impact of budget cuts to their contracts.
7. Given the predicted overspend for 2015/16, and in order to support this ongoing improvement work, Members would wish to see a major review of the Directorate's base budget to more accurately reflect the current budgetary position. This is particularly important given the concerns about the effectiveness of children's safeguarding in the County outlined in the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board's annual report for 2014/15. Panel Members look forward to hearing more about plans for the 2016/17 budget as part of the budget scrutiny process.
 8. Members were also concerned about the impact of reductions in partners' budgets. In particular there was concern that schools – and especially primary schools – would not have sufficient resources to be able to support safeguarding work. Concern remains that some children will fall through the net.
 9. In order to support improvement work, the Chair of the Scrutiny Panel would wish to be involved as appropriate in any future meetings with the Peer Review Team.

Findings

A 'back to basics' Safeguarding Improvement Plan

10. Members were informed that a structured framework around governance was being managed through the Safeguarding Improvement Board, a body chaired by the Chief Executive. A Safeguarding Improvement Plan had been developed which included 10 standards and would be implemented via a phased approach.
11. From May 2015, the focus had been on:
 - Seeing children
 - Effective management oversight
 - Evidence based and timely decision making and recording
 - Quality child protection enquiries
 - Implementation of the local assessment protocol
12. A Quality Assurance Framework would be implemented from September 2015.
13. Members recognise that measuring outcomes in child protection is complex and agreed that the focus was on making a difference to children's lives, ensuring a child centred approach and intervening at the right time to make a difference. Not every family needed a social worker; sometimes intervention in a crisis situation was sufficient.
14. Members welcomed the fact that, although in May 2015 only 60% of assessments were completed on time, this had now improved and 90% of assessments were being completed on time.

Resolving the future direction for the 'Front Door'

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15. The 'Family Front Door' is a working term for a service that brings together the current functions within the Children's Social Care Access Centre, Early Help Hub and other services that make decisions around accessing services.
16. The Family Front Door Programme is part of the prevention and intervention agenda. A main aim is to improve the quality of information, advice and guidance in the workforce – for parents, young people and professionals – to help people make positive choices. The service aims to ensure that decision making is effective.
17. The Council is working with iMPower on a prevention analysis review project and data analysis headlines were shared with Members. Members were also informed about the primary success measures which are:
 - Reduced referrals into children's social care (More children, young people and families are being helped at an earlier stage)
 - Reduced contacts into the 'Front Door' (improved self service)
 - Improved conversion rate from 'contact to referral' (improved understanding and application of thresholds)
18. A number of quality metrics had also been developed in relation to how much and how well the Family Front Door performs.
19. The development of the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is also important in relation to this work and is ongoing, with the aim that the MASH will support the speeding up of decision making.
20. In summary, Members acknowledged that the Family Front Door Programme was work in progress, and they understood that early work had suggested that there was scope for doing things more efficiently and thus creating capacity. Members acknowledged that there was a strong business case for effective early intervention, as the costs of late intervention could be huge.
21. However, the following concerns remained:
 - There was some doubt as to whether partners (in particular schools) would have the capacity and resources to do more. Given reduced resources, schools may increasingly focus on their core educational role, given the potentially serious consequences of not doing well in Ofsted Inspections.
 - The Health Visitor and the School Nursing Service should be properly wrapped into early intervention work, as they were the safety net for many families.
22. Members welcomed the focus on measuring success through data analysis and would welcome ongoing feedback on the results of this work.

Implementing a detailed financial recovery plan

23. The Directorate hoped that its medium term financial strategy would be more open and transparent and aimed to indicate clearly how each area of activity was doing financially. However, Members acknowledged that financial predictions were very difficult because the Directorate could never predict how many children would require

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its services and for how long. For some service areas, one additional child entering the system might lead to a large amount of additional expenditure.

24. The Directorate also has a programme of cost reduction activities, such as the work being undertaken by the Fostering Team to increase recruitment of in-house foster carers and reduce the Council's reliance on more expensive agency placements. The Directorate has also recently invested in in-house supported living provision. Although there was an initial financial implication, this provision would be lower cost in the longer term.
25. Again in the longer term, early help arrangements should also help to bring down the number of children coming into care. So far, early help had had some impact on numbers of children coming into care, but not as great an impact as the Council would have wanted.
26. Improving adoption rates would also help in reducing the number of children in the care system. The Council's adoption rates had improved greatly in recent years, with more children being adopted each year. However, the courts had also had an impact on adoption, in that local authorities were now forced to look at every alternative option for a child before adoption could be considered. This had resulted in delay for a number of adoptions.
27. The Directorate's predicted overspend for 2015/16 was £5.8 million.
28. Members wished to highlight the following areas of concern:
 - The Council received a 'staying put' grant to support looked after young people post-18. Although work was ongoing to monitor this funding, there was some concern that the grant would not be sufficient, creating further budget pressures.
 - Members welcomed the financial analysis that was currently being carried out for the next 2 financial years but acknowledged that this was an art rather than an exact science and was subject to a margin of error.
 - Members were concerned that many of the budgetary pressures were out of the Directorate's control. Although forecasts for future placement levels could be made using placement history and trends, in the short term the Directorate had limited control over the number of children entering the system. Some areas of spend could be looked at (such as bringing more foster care in-house) but the amount of money saved was small in the context of the overall budget. It was not possible for the Council to refuse to take into care who had an assessed need.
 - In 4 years there had been an increase of 128 children looked after by the County Council. This reflected the national trend and the reasons for the rise in numbers are varied. Analysis of comparative data on the number of looked after children per 10,000 children under 18 shows that Worcestershire's rate is below the national average based on March 2014 figures.
29. Members felt that the large overspend for 2015/16 showed that the Service's base budget was not sufficient. Addressing the Directorate's budgetary issues should be a major priority for the Council given the concerns about the effectiveness of safeguarding in the County outlined in the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board's annual report 2014/15.

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Review and defining the role of Early Help

30. Work on this priority was still very much a work in progress, as part of the development of the prevention and intervention strategy. The Early Help Strategy would now become part of the Children and Families Prevention and Intervention Strategy (2015-2020), which would be Worcestershire-wide. The Council had recently taken on the responsibility for public health and the health visitor service and these services would be included in the strategy.
31. The peer review had suggested that there was some confusion between the Early Help Strategy and the Early Help Service which was commissioned out and run in each of the County's 6 district council areas. Early help was aligned with the Stronger Families programme which had so far supported over 1250 families.
32. The Early Help Strategy and Action Plan would be considered by Cabinet and the Health and Well-being Board in November.
33. The service had seen demand increase at the same time as the budget had decreased and it was clear there was now a need to think differently about service delivery. The current model of early help commissioning was not sustainable in the light of ongoing budget reductions.
34. In summary, Members acknowledged the level of challenge that the Council faces in terms of increased demand for early help services at a time of reduced budget. However, Members also noted that the service could not confidently say that all resources were being used completely effectively as there may be a certain level of duplication. Members welcomed the ongoing work to make sure money was spent more effectively.
35. However, Members wished to highlight the following concerns:
 - Other partners, including schools, do not necessarily have the budget or time to become involved in early help work. In particular, this would be a challenge for primary schools. Concern remains that some children will fall through the net.
 - It was suggested that there should be a focus on 'low level' mental health issues in schools, so that issues could be nipped in the bud before they became more serious.
 - There was concern that the current service level will not be enough to meet demand going forward.
 - It was acknowledged that outcomes for children who go into care are not always as good as for those who stay with their families. In support of the early help model, it is often best to continue to work with families for as long as possible.
 - There appears to be some uncertainty about the potential impact on the early help providers of any changes to their contracts. Managers were now exploring the implications of budget changes with providers. Members are concerned about any risks as a result of this uncertainty, including safeguarding risks, and risks to positive relationships with partners and the Council's reputation.
 - Concern was expressed about the impact on day nurseries of raising the minimum (living) wage. Some day nurseries may no longer be viable if no more funding is made available when they have to pay the living wage. The impact of this on families in need was a cause for concern.

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Methodology

Date of Meeting	
25 June 2015	Full Panel meeting to consider findings of the Children's Safeguarding Peer Review
30 July 2015	Representatives from the Panel (Paul Denham, Ian Hopwood and Fran Oborski) met with Hannah Needham, Strategic Commissioner, Children's Services to discuss 'Resolving the future direction for the 'Front Door' and 'Review and defining the role of Early Help'
5 August 2015	Representatives from the Panel (Lynne Duffy and Bob Banks) met Cath Knowles, Assistant Director for Assessment and Intervention and Diane Partidge, Strategic Lead: Improvement and Quality to discuss 'A back to basics' Safeguarding Improvement Plan'
10 September 2015	Representatives from the Panel (Paul Denham, Lynne Duffy, June Griffiths, Ian Hopwood, and Fran Oborski) met Steph Simcox to discuss 'Implementing a detailed financial recovery plan'

October 2015