

Minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 19 July 2022

Present: Bob Spencer (Chairman)

Attendance

Johnny McMahon
Gillian Pardesi

Mike Wilcox

Also in attendance: Julia Jessel and Mark Sutton

Apologies: Gill Burnett, Janet Eagland, Derrick Huckfield and Kath Perry, MBE

PART ONE

12. Declarations of Interest

There were none at this meeting.

13. Minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2022

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 16 June 2022 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

14. Draft Early Help Strategy

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People shared the local Authorities (LA's) recognition that Early Help is more effective in promoting the welfare of children than a reactive approach to services. As part of Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018), Early Help was identified as "providing support as soon as a problem emerges, at any point in a child's life, from the foundation years through to the teenage years." Effective early help relied upon local organisations and agencies working together to: identify children and families who would benefit from early help; undertake an assessment of the need for early help; and provide targeted early help services to address the assessed needs of a child and their family which focused on activity to improve the outcomes for the child.

As part of the LA's responsibility to promote interagency working and co-operation to improve the welfare of all children, a partnership strategy was being produced. Whilst Staffordshire has had an Early Help Strategy

since 2015, a new version was being developed in partnership to meet the needs of local families and take account of local and national changes. Families' feedback and views on the effectiveness of Early Help had been instrumental in helping develop this new strategy, with the strategy being refreshed through the Early Help Operational Group.

Members considered the draft joint Early Help Strategy, noting that the intention was to work more effectively together, avoiding agencies taking different approaches to early help and providing one coordinated response.

Whilst being encouraged by the strategy, Members raised concerns that its success was dependent on effective working together across partner agencies and queried how confident Officers were in achieving this. During Covid some communications between agencies had been adversely affected. However, it was an aspiration of the Family Hub model to ensure a single point of contact to simplify access to services and support. Although it was early in the process partners appeared to be positive about the proposed approach and the improvements this would make for families in their navigation of services.

Members noted that 26% of Staffordshire children did not reach the expected levels of development across all Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) indicators, asking whether these children were waiting too long for the support they needed. 1 in 4 children not being school ready showed there was more work to be done to address this, however the figure had been 50% four years ago, evidencing the improvements that had been made through work with nurseries and other providers.

Last year should have been the first set of Year 6 SATs taken by a cohort of children who had received early help initiatives and it had been hoped that this would have demonstrated the level of success achieved through early help initiatives. Unfortunately, due to Covid these exams had not been taken and therefore it was not possible to use this as an evaluation of improvements made.

Staffordshire had a good network of Children's Centres which would form part of the Family Hub developments. The Committee were heartened that nationally Staffordshire were in the top quartile for children meeting their EYFS indicators, however there remained more work to be done. It was also important to acknowledge that for pre-school children the work was often with parents and carers to help them understand how best to support their child's development. The Hungry Little Minds initiative was shared as an example of work with parents and families, where parents signed up for emails which gave simple but important advice to help them support their child's development.

The Committee had some concerns around how those in need of support were identified. Staffordshire had a data base that included a range of 70 different indicators, including detail from external partners, which helped to build a composite picture of the family. This had been used during the pandemic to help identify those families that might need greater support and allowed a more proactive and targeted response. This data could also be used to produce a predictive analysis report which helped highlight those children in need of support.

Members asked whether there was evidence that families might regard early intervention support as “interfering”. Some families assumed that there was an element of judgement to support services, but officers worked hard to overcome for this, with examples of the range of this work shared with the Committee.

Good communication was vital to this work, and this would be addressed as part of the delivery and implementation plan. This work was iterative as the support structures, partners and staff within them constantly changed. However, the Strategy would form the guiding light to help show the agreed direction of travel, the implementation plan being crucial to its effective delivery, as was the continual development of effective communications.

Members noted the importance of good relationships between those involved in Early Help and stressed the importance of face-to-face meetings in developing these.

Within the Strategy percentage figures for children were given around a range of indicators, such as being a young carer, achievements at school or being obese. Members suggested it would be useful to have an indication of the number of children who would appear across multiple indicators.

The Committee congratulated Officers and the Cabinet Member on the strategy development. Because Early Help was so important they suggested that, once the final strategy was available, all Members of the Council should receive training and/or a briefing on this initiative.

RESOLVED: That the new joint Early Help Strategy be welcomed and the Committee’s feedback help inform the strategies development.

15. Customer Feedback & Complaints Annual Report - Children's Social Care

In line with The Children Act 1989 Representation Procedure (England) Regulations 2006, the Local Authority is required to produce an Annual Report. This report must include the number of complaints recorded

under the Representation Procedure together with information on the outcome of each representation and whether statutory timescales were adhered to. Although not part of the statutory requirements, this report also included the number of Corporate complaints received within the Children and Families remit, these being complaints concerning SEND. Differences in the processes between Statutory and Corporate complaints were shared with Members.

The Committee considered the Annual Report, Customer Feedback and Complaints Service, Children's Social Services 2021/22 which contained detail of the nature of complaints received, together with responses provided and their handling by the Council.

Members were aware of the importance for the Local Authority to use the evidence available from Complaints and Representations to inform service improvements. The report provided information on how complaints investigations were used to identify specific themes, where service improvement could be addressed, and highlighted where the County Council was providing quality services to customers which might be identified from compliments received. The Committee noted that this was in line with the Council's Strategic Plan, to use Customer Insight to develop high quality services which meet customer needs.

Members noted all complaints were risk assessed initially to enable early resolution where possible.

The Committee queried whether there was a mechanism for young people's voices to be heard, noting that most complaints were brought by parents and carers rather than young people themselves. There was an opportunity for young people to use independent advocates as well as the Children's Voice Project. Tech services were also available. There had previously been a free phone number available, but this had been discontinued as it had not been used.

Members noted that 62% of complaints were responded to within the required timescales and were informed that work was ongoing to improve this figure.

The Committee asked whether there was an issue with persistent complainers and were informed that where a complainant was unreasonably persistent in complaining about an issue that had already been through the complaint process these concerns would be considered by the Monitoring Officer and, where appropriate, the agreed process for dealing with unreasonably persistent complainants would be followed. Members also noted that in some instances complaints were made to the LA about issues that were outside their control, for example Court

decisions. These figures were reflected in the Annual report's complaint refusal figures.

Members noted the substantial increase in the number of referrals made to Members of Parliament (MPs), from 70-1000 across the Council. In many cases the referrals related to complaints already within the system, with complainants wanting to add weight to their concerns through their MP referral. As far as possible one response was returned to the Complainant, with the MP receiving a copy.

The Committee noted the increase in SEND complaints. This was partly connected to the increase in requests for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and partly due to the changes to the District Model of delivery which had resulted in some loss of expertise. The Committee received reassurance that there was confidence the issues resulting from the District Model changes would be overcome once the Model had become embedded.

RESOLVED: That the report be welcomed and the Committee's comments be noted.

16. Customer Feedback & Complaints Annual Report - Adult Social Care

The Cabinet Member for Health, Care and Wellbeing introduced the Annual Report to the Committee, outlining that despite the great difficulties faced during the pandemic the number of complaints received had not escalated. The culture of aiming to resolve complaints informally and in a timely fashion had undoubtedly helped with this.

The operation of the Statutory Complaints Procedure had been established under the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 and the Local Authority Act 1970, which placed a duty on the Council to publish an Annual Report on the activity of the Statutory Complaints and Representation Service. The Committee considered detail within the report on activity during the twelve months between April 2021 and March 2022 in respect of statutory complaints relating to Adult Social Care. The report contained information about the nature of complaints received, together with responses provided and their handling by the Council. Organisational Learning remained at the heart of the legislation and was reflected in the function of the Responsible Person and Actions Plans that ensured steps were taken to improve, where services may have failed to deliver to an acceptable standard. Members were pleased to note

that monthly meetings were held to consider lessons learnt and ensure this learning was implemented across services.

The top three areas of complaint related to: delays in receiving services; poor communication; and financial assessments. The Cabinet Member informed the Committee that work was in progress to address these areas, including written confirmation of discussions with service users to help combat some communication concerns. There was also an awareness that the new Social Care Act will require financial assessments that are prompt and accurate as demands on services increase. Changes to the way in which finance for adult services will be administered were also a potential concern, with the gross amount to be paid to service users under the new legislation for direct payments, and the LA claiming funds back dependent on financial assessments. This had the potential to present some real difficulties and work was proactively undertaken to anticipate challenges and address these.

Examples of common areas for complaint around financial issues were shared with Members, including the £400.00 administrative charge.

The Committee were also pleased to note that front line staff subject to a complaint were supported appropriately.

RESOLVED: That the report be welcomed and that the proactive work to identify and address future challenges from the new Social care Act be commended.

17. Work Programme

The Committee agreed the following changes to their work programme:

- the improvement action plan following the Children & Families Ofsted Focused Visit in May be included on the work programme for the 1 September agenda;
- following consideration of the SEND White Paper by the Prosperous O&S Committee in June, Members had received a copy of the report and the relevant minute extract. As a result they agreed to take this item off the work programme to avoid duplication. It was noted that as cross Committee items come up the possibility of joint meetings should be considered as a way to avoid duplication;
- changes to the method for seeking the views of young carers were being considered that would create the least disturbance to the young carers themselves;
- the Sexual Harassment in Schools report Executive Response was still to come to the Committee and this has been discussed with the Cabinet Member.

RESOLVED: That the changes made to the Committee's work programme be agreed.

Chairman