

Minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 14 September 2023

Present: Bob Spencer (Chair)

Attendance	
Gill Burnett-Faulkner (Vice-Chair (Overview))	Johnny McMahon
Janet Eagland	Kath Perry, MBE
Ann Edgeller	Mike Wilcox

Also in attendance: Mark Sutton

Apologies: Gillian Pardesi, Paul Snape and Conor Wileman

Part One

12. Declarations of Interest

There were none on this occasion.

13. Minutes of the meeting held on 27 July 2023

Resolved: That the minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 27 July 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

14. Impact of Cabinet Investment in Children's Services

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People introduced a presentation on the impact of the Cabinet investment in Children's Services.

Members received a breakdown of spend and details of a timeline for all recruitment activity, most of which had been completed by the end of July. The exception to this was the additional challenges around new social work posts where, rather than just wishing to uplift the current posts, there was work towards addressing two additional problems: having enough staff to meet workload needs; and to find a longer-term solution to making Staffordshire the Authority of choice for social workers. Part of the identified solution was to establish excellent training and development alongside a progression mechanism to enable Staffordshire not only to grow their own social workers, but also to retain them. Consultation with staff and the Trade Unions around these developments finished this week and it was expected that recruitment to these new posts would start from October.

Members also heard that last year an investment into residential care staff had been identified to help support the high numbers of children and young people coming into residential care. This investment supported Staffordshire in being competitive within the market, helping recruitment and retention of staff and to future proof Staffordshire's residential service. This was particularly important because of the increase in complexity of need of those requiring residential care. A decision had therefore been taken to look again at planning within this service area resulting in a delay with this investment. It was expected that business cases would be shared with Members later this year.

Cabinet's investment had reflected well with both DfE and Ofsted, clearly showing the service aspirations and the support from the political leadership. This had helped to influence Staffordshire being chosen by the DfE to take part in two pilot projects, with two further bids currently being considered. There had also been DfE support for the progress made around the Accelerate Progress Plan (APP) for SEND.

Staff stability and morale had seen a significant improvement, being more positive and more solution focused, as evidenced in both staff retention as well as through results from the employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS). The additional 1.5 social work posts had added capacity to district teams to support children and families. Improvements made had resulted in some district teams stabilising for the first time, eg Cannock. Members were also pleased to note that the narrative for Staffordshire had changed as a result of the investment, with more positivity amongst its staff and with increased numbers and quality of applicants where posts were advertised externally.

The Committee heard details of developments resulting from district investment, including the recruitment of deputy district leads, embedding a culture of performance and better financial management, with a focus on Early Help, Children with Disabilities and SEND. These services had been amalgamated well within the district working place-based approach and ideology from the Transformation process. All SEND key workers were now in post. Recruitment of Education Psychologists had been a challenge, but this was a challenge nationally. Three Education Psychologists had been recruited to start in September 2023. Whilst an increase in demand had meant that caseloads remained quite high, the additional capacity resulting from the investment had enabled this increase to be managed effectively.

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service was now fully established. Whilst the average workload had gone down it was still a little higher than the ideal number. However, a reduction in the number of children on Child Protection (CP) plans, and hopefully reducing the number

of children in care moving forward, should help bring caseloads more in line with ideal figures by the end of this financial year. An important part of the IRO role was to look at managing risks and closing CP plans with efficacy and in a timely manner.

Staff recruitment to central service roles had been completed, with all staff now onboarded. A new strategic operational governance process was being developed. Improvements were also being developed around Missing children and those vulnerable to child exploitation. This included increasing the number of staff to ensure the challenge of exploitation could be more effectively tackled. Working with partners was key to this area of work, with more effective partnership working with the Police and the harm reduction hubs to create an effective level of support for those young people who were vulnerable to exploitation.

A Quality Assurance (QA) Officer, along with commissioning support, had been recruited. This would enable a more balanced workload and oversight of the quality of placements as well as embedding timely processing of contracts and re-commissioning. QA officers also helped to work with providers to ensure safeguards were in place for the complex needs of children in residential care, enabling better collaborative relationships with providers, helping to de-escalate challenging situations and avoid providers refusing young people with complex needs.

Details of the average applications per vacancy by district showed South Staffordshire appeared to have a reduced number of vacancies from the previous year. Members queried the reasons for this. South Staffordshire was a stable district dealing, in general, with less complex needs. The reason for this may be due to there being less vacancies.

Members discussed the balance between progression planning and internal recruitment that enabled the best candidates for any post to be appointed. Discussion also centred around cultural change and how this was managed. The Committee were informed that many staff were lost during the Transformation process. However, a number had now returned. Opportunities for staff progression helped support retention, though any appointment was equitable with high challenge, high support and high standards. Posts would be advertised externally where there were no suitable internal candidates.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomed the presentation, and particularly the frank and insightful nature of the question responses. The manner in which areas of improvement had been identified and investment targeted was supported and Members felt progress was encouraging.

Resolved: That the Cabinet Member and Officers be congratulated on the

improvements made through the effective targeted use of the Cabinet investment to date.

15. Children in Care Programme Update

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People introduced a presentation on the Children in Care Programme. He shared with Members that the number of children in care in Staffordshire was relatively high. This included a significant rise in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), a rise from 40 to 104 over a short period of time. The County Council had little control over the numbers of UASC. Work was being developed to influence the number of children in care who were not UASC through the Children in Care Programme. This programme looked to ensure the best outcome for children and young people, enabling them to stay within their families wherever possible. The Cabinet Member also shared his aspiration to develop initiatives that prevented private residential care providers driving up placement costs.

The Children in Care Programme had been a priority for some time but was consolidated in its approach in October 2022 to help reach its ambitions and targets. The establishment of the Children in Care Programme Board created the right vehicle for constant planning, monitoring and problem solving.

The Programme had three key priorities:

- reducing the number of children that come into the care system;
- increasing the number of children exiting the care system;
- reducing the consequent overspend on the placement budget.

These priorities were shared with front line staff explaining that keeping children in the care system was, in the vast majority of cases, not in their best interests as once the young person became 18, the care was removed and they were often ill prepared to take care of themselves. Remaining within their community and learning a resilience and understanding of the realities of that community prepared them better for their future adulthood. It was therefore understood that exiting children from care as early as possible, or keeping children out of care completely, where safe to do so, resulted in better long-term outcomes. This approach looked constantly at how to mitigate and manage risks within the community rather than a risk averse approach that took the child into care until they were 18.

Members received details of the programme's short-term successes, including: a reduction in the number of children coming into care between April to June 2023 compared with January to March 2023; 16 young people moving out of residential placements from July; and children being identified for exit from the care system through the Discharge Planning Team.

The newly established Discharge Planning Team will create capacity for the IRO service and social work staff. The Committee also received details of the priority given to the Children in Care programme and staff and key partner engagement. More emphasis had also been placed on the Restorative Practice model, with greater challenge and support.

Challenges in implementing the Programme were shared with Members. These included working with partner organisations, as well as the Judiciary and Cafcass, where reduction of children coming into the care system may not be their shared priority. In these instances, greater challenge was given and risks mitigated to support children remaining in the community. Further challenges were around: placement sufficiency and response to trauma; cost of care and inflation; high levels of interdependencies with other projects within Children and Families; risk averse systems; and challenges in community resources and resilience.

Details of the Programme's priorities and progress were shared with the Committee, specifically with:

- the Discharge Planning Team
- residential mapping
- an improved reunification support offer
- a review of edge of care services
- improved practice in IRO services
- culture change around children in care

The Committee also received details of the timeline for delivery and anticipated impact.

Members asked how the number of UASC were managed and specifically how they were supported in attaining functional English language. Prior to October 2022 there was a planned and centrally coordinated placement of UASC across all local authorities. Since 2022 the landscape had changed, with asylum seekers accommodated in hotels, and with some of these claiming to be children under 18 years. There was no opportunity for local authorities to plan for such placements, however, once it had been established that an individual was under 18 the local authority had a duty of care for them. If their asylum status remained unresolved, they stayed in the care system until the age of 21. Providing enough language support was difficult, especially with the numbers and range of languages involved. An initial solution to this was the use of specialist headphones that translated between languages. Joined up working across teams took place to help resolve issues, including with education providers as well as supportive work with the Police. Work through local hubs looked to provide support and to reduce trauma.

The Committee were heartened by the exit from care strategies but understood that for a small group of children and young people residential

care would remain the best option. Resilience was key to enabling young people to achieve independence and Members asked what work was in place to support building this resilience. Details of the House Project were shared. This was a new initiative which enabled a group of ten children aged 17 to live together in a shared house during their last year of care, learning key life skills and building life-long links that would help support their move to independence.

On querying what checks were in place to ensure that children who were returned to their families remained safe, Members were informed that any reunification took place over a 40-week period, with planned support developed during this time. Any exit from care had to go through the Court process which involved a lot of checks and balances to ensure it was a safe decision.

The Committee asked what mental health support was in place for children in care and those leaving care. The mental health support available was around a very medical model, however supporting the wider mental wellbeing required a different broader approach. Work was underway with the Midlands Partnership Foundation Trust to consider how this gap between services could be filled. There was a need to look at how trauma could be better addressed. District Leads were also now developing better working relationships with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

Concerns around the cost of residential care were discussed, with a suggestion that building local authority owned homes could be a way forward. The Committee were informed that business cases were currently being considered to develop county owned residential children's care homes. Whilst this was not necessarily a cheaper form of care, it ensured the right standard of care and should also help to change the marketplace and reduce the costs of private providers.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and Officer for their frank and inciteful presentation and the problem-solving approach so clearly being followed.

Resolved: That the developments through the Children in Care programme be welcomed and supported.

16. Work Programme

An extra meeting had been added to the Committee's work programme to

start at 12.30pm on 24 October prior to their informal meeting with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (the Commissioner). This was a one item only agenda to scrutinise the Early Years Strategy prior to its consideration at Cabinet on 15 November.

Members had requested a pre-meeting in preparation for their meeting with the Commissioner. This had been arranged for Monday 16 October at 3.00pm via Teams.

Resolved: That the amendments to the work programme be agreed.

Chair