

Minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 24 October 2023

Present: Bob Spencer (Chair)

Attendance	
Gill Burnett-Faulkner (Vice-Chair (Overview))	Gillian Pardesi Paul Snape (Vice-Chair (Scrutiny))
Ann Edgeller	Conor Wileman
Johnny McMahon	

Also in attendance: Tina Clements and Mark Sutton

Apologies: Janet Eagland, Kath Perry, MBE and Mike Wilcox

Part One

17. Declarations of Interest

There were none at this meeting.

18. Minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2023

Resolved: That the minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 14 September 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

19. Strategic Vision for Early Years

The Committee considered a report and presentation outlining the strategic vision for early years. They were aware that transformative reforms to childcare had been announced by the Chancellor in the Spring Budget. The investment was to provide additional funded hours for childcare, helping working families with childcare costs. Members received details of the phased introduction of the new entitlement, with increased funding of childcare places in England from 50% to 80%. Entitlement of subsidised childcare was also being extended, with the 30-hours entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds extended down to those who are 9 months old. A national wraparound childcare scheme was also being introduced, providing schools and local authorities with funding to support the set up of wraparound provision for primary school children from September 2024.

In July 2023 the Government launched a funding consultation on the approach to funding 2 year olds and under from 2024-25. The consultation considered proposed new funding formula for calculating local

authority hourly funding rates for the entitlements for 2 year olds and under from April 2024, with the outcome of this consultation expected in the autumn term of 2023.

The Committee heard details of difficulties within the childcare market, noting that the number of Ofsted registered providers had fallen by 7% during the period March 2022 to March 2023.

These significant changes required a new approach which had resulted in a review of the Early Years structure within Staffordshire following the transfer of the Early Years Team from Entrust back in-house with the County Council. The proposed changes were intended to improve outcomes for children and families through more efficient, joined up and holistic services. The new early years team design and delivery would be integrated into the Family Hub model, building on the integrated access to early help and support.

The Early Years Team undertook a number of functions, including placement sufficiency and market development, quality and support for settings and training and development. With the Team being brought back inhouse a number of changes were being proposed, including:

- no longer routinely charging settings for training and development;
- cultural and structural change to the Team, removing the flat structure, introducing line management, defining roles more clearly and removing the very function specific culture;
- encouraging use of initiative and a broader approach to early years and away from only acting on direction;
- building resilience within the team; and
- greater resource into market development to ensure placement sufficiency for the extended entitlements.

The Committee were pleased to note that Staffordshire was in the upper quartile for take up of early year's provision for three and four year olds. They received details of a number of initiatives for early years, including the Hungry Little Minds pilot project which offered information, advice and guidance to support children in their earliest years. They also heard about learning from the Stoke Speaks Out initiative which Staffordshire was adapting for use within the County and which helped identify developmental delays. These initiatives had received one-off funding, however there was an ambition to make these a permanent part of the early years provision.

Details of the principles and budget allocation for early years functions were shared with the Committee. Members supported the principles and considered details of the staff engagement process, noting that the success in achieving the principles depended on the team delivery and querying whether those moving from Entrust had been able to adapt to

the culture change in approach. They were pleased to hear that the new team had great potential and there was confidence that they were open to change. The proposed reorganisation would also help build capacity within the team.

Funding of nursery places was discussed at length, with concern that greater levels of per place funding was needed to ensure providers remained sustainable. They were informed that the rate set by National Government was passported in full to providers through the two year old rate and early years supplementary grant, however there was an acceptance that this was too low and representation continued to be made to increase this figure, understanding that being unable to cross subsidise would make placement funding increasingly difficult. There were good relationships between the County Councils' Early Years Lead and providers, including quarterly meetings where issues were discussed. Staffordshire had a low rate of providers closing post Covid compared with national figures.

On querying contingency measures for potential provider failure Members were pleased to hear that these had recently been tested when an alternative provider to the one currently operating from the Children's Centre was required. Provision was regularly monitored to ensure sufficient places were available. The Committee were pleased to hear that there had been no instances within Staffordshire where the Team had been unable to source a childcare place when requested, although this may not have been the families first choice of provider.

Resolved: That the Committee:

- a) supports the strategic vision for the early years' service and acknowledges the contribution this will make to Staffordshire's Strategic Plan;
- b) supports the principles for the proposed reorganisation of the Early Years Service delivery model as set out within the report and the further development of this model by Officers with staff and stakeholders;
- c) supports the request to Cabinet that delegated authority be given to the Director for Children's Services in consultation with the lead member for Children and Young People and the lead member for Education and SEND to approve the final staffing structure for the service; and
- d) supports the planned budget profile for the Early Years Service and investment in new areas of delivery.

20. Work Programme

The Committee had an informal meeting with the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner at the conclusion of this meeting.

A request had been received to include two extra reports to the 4 January agenda for pre-decision scrutiny. These were:

- i) Provision of services for children and young people
- ii) Family Help Pilot

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

Chair