

# Minutes of the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee Meeting held on 1 March 2021

Present: Bob Spencer (Vice-Chairman, in the Chair)

## Attendance

Ann Beech	Bryan Jones
Ron Clarke	Jason Jones
Ann Edgeller	Paul Snape

**Also in attendance:** Charlotte Atkins and Mark Sutton

**Apologies:** John Francis and Mike Worthington

## PART ONE

### 1. Declarations of Interest

There were none at this meeting.

### 2. Minutes of the meeting held on 6 January 2021

**RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the Safe & Strong Communities select Committee meeting held on 6 January 2021 be confirmed and signed by the Vice-Chairman.

### 3. Children & Families Transformation Phase 2 Update & Learning from the Serious Case Review

The Serious Case Review (SCR) had been commissioned by the Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire Safeguarding Children's Board following a house fire in 2019 in which four children had died. The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People shared details of the Review with Members and the harrowing nature of the event. Findings had showed the incident could not have been predicted but highlighting areas for learning.

Members received a presentation from the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities on learning from the SCR feeding into the Transformation programme.

Late in 2018 and the beginning of 2019 there had been difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers. At that time Staffordshire was the only authority rated "good" in the West Midlands. Consequently, some surrounding authorities offered financial inducements for Staffordshire social workers to move authorities. Loosing staff resulted in agency social worker staff numbers rising to 18% and an increase in case load numbers to an average of 30 cases per social worker. The insidious nature of long-term neglect was not always acknowledged at that time until a threshold event occurred to prompt intervention.

Members heard that the formal consultation for the Children and Families Transformation Phase 2 commenced today, concluding on 10 May. The Transformation to date had evidenced developments since the incident in 2019. The social worker vacancy rate is now 4%, returning to the relative stability prior to 2018. The average case load per social worker was now down to 18. A professional lead for practice and development had been included into the proposed structure with the re-introduction of the Principal Social Worker post. Becky Reynolds had been appointed to the position and was an outstanding addition to the Directorate, working with front line staff to identify training needs and embed development, including around long-term neglect. A recent National Social Workers survey had shown that Staffordshire social workers felt more supported than their regional and national peers. Investment had been made in the number of family support workers, with their expertise in helping to combat neglect being key.

An important component of the Transformation programme was making the currently complex and bureaucratic IT systems easier, enabling more time to be spent with families and less time on form filling. Currently 60% of a social worker's time was taken with administration and 40% working directly with families. The aspiration was to flip this enabling more time working directly with families, simplifying and streamlining processes, as well as introducing further administrative support.

Restorative practice had been introduced 12 months ago, focusing on direct work with families. This was a model that all outstanding authorities used and enabled constant contact with families, early identification of changes and the introduction of actions to address these. Staffordshire was also one of a handful of authorities to take part in a Social Workers in Schools pilot project which brought education and social work professionals together to help identify signs of neglect and address these at the earliest opportunity. Recognising and addressing neglect formed an intrinsic part of many elements of the new system, taking account of learning over the last two years.

The front door first contact point had been redesigned to be less form based and more conversational, avoiding multiple re-referrals, helping to fully understand the child, and enable the correct support to meet their needs. Additional social workers and senior social workers would be introduced into the referral process to support this. The successful Place Based Approach and earliest help model was being built upon, with commissioned services helping to support the early identification of neglect, including family support contracts across the County.

All County Council staff and partner agencies were currently being trained to use the NSPCC's graded care profile tool. This helped social workers, health visitors, family support workers, GPs and other professionals assess against several continuing neglect criteria and consider together ways to improve. The new model was based on the whole family approach which had been so successful through Staffordshire's Building Resilient Families and Communities (BRFC) programme and addressed the root cause of the problem not just the symptoms. Staffordshire was a national lead authority in this approach. The new model also reduced "hand-offs" as families moved through the system, therefore preventing information being lost. This was achieved by the key worker model with, wherever possible, one linked worker staying with the family throughout their involvement with services. District level services would include adult specialist workers to work with families to help prevent children coming into care. These

specialists helped address the root causes of neglect, such as drug and alcohol misuse, poverty, debt, domestic violence or housing problems. It was hoped that working with adults as well as children in the family would slow down the spiral of neglect by addressing its cause.

Family group conferencing was being introduced across the whole of the service, with extra funding from Cabinet allocated for this. This brought together extended family and close friends to form a network for parents, putting together a plan of support that parents could rely on. This extended support group helped them to improve and maintain a quality home environment for their children and was shown to make a significant difference to families in preventing neglect.

Changes to the quality assurance framework were being made to move towards quantifying the quality of work and the difference it made. Deep dive audits had also been undertaken around neglect. These had been across multi-agency partners on the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Safeguarding Children's Board (SSSCB) following the SCR and helped to identify where there were areas for improvement. The use of the NSPCC's graded care profile tool had been informed by this work. A review of the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) was currently underway to ensure the timeliness of referrals and included all necessary information and partner's input.

Members received details of the new District Model Integrated Teams, including the key worker model and adult specialist teams. Members heard that there was a move towards becoming a learning organisation again, with a new intelligence function having been created 18 months ago giving an improved oversight of the work undertaken and direct line of sight on critical emerging issues. This function also brought together learning from reviews, audits, deep dives, feedback from practitioners as well as feedback from children, young people and their families. This then helped develop a whole system training programme. Learning also came from staff members, with quarterly reports from independent reviewing officers (IRO) included in this. The IROs chaired child protection conferences and were able to spot trends in good practice as well as trends in poor performance which could then feed into the training and development plan.

The new structure had been developed following 12 to 18 months of discussions with those authorities judged as having outstanding services. Members also heard that for the first time for many years a practice week had been held, where 50 senior officers observed practice, capturing good and bad examples and completing over 500 audits during this period, informing the learning plan. The Children's Improvement Board has been retained. This Board received in-depth performance information and deep dives on areas of concern, holding officers to account.

Recruitment and retention of social workers remained an issue nationally with constant poaching of staff from one authority to another. Work was underway with the 14 West Midlands LAs to create a regional recruitment campaign and to broker an agreement to stop financial inducements such as the "golden hello". Staffordshire had always had problems with staff poaching, with 17 other local authorities with children's services in easy travelling distance. Retention of staff remained a constant issue. Challenges also remained around the culture of the service. Whilst this was changing there was still a need to move further away from the command and control methods of working, to

reduce bureaucracy and become less hierarchical. Further challenges would come from the Covid pandemic, with a need to work closely with education colleagues to close the gaps created during the pandemic and to overcome the legacy of covid on the whole family. Whilst the resources were available based on an assessed estimated need it was a possibility that it could be an under estimation once the actual need resulting from the pandemic was known.

Members noted the recommendations from the SCR, including the introduction of focus groups, and asked whether there was a plan for their implementation. The report belonged to the SSSCB and the partner organisations that made up that Board. A comprehensive implementation plan had been produced, with progress on implementation reported to the SSSCB each month. Cross organisational groups of practitioners were being brought together, along with discussions with children and families using services where appropriate. The learning from these discussions helped inform a partnership training plan. Where learning related to a specific organisation the specific training and development would be taken on board by that organisation.

The Select Committee welcomed the move towards a more conversational approach to front door referrals and the importance of being intelligence rather than data led. With the move towards restorative practice they asked if Officers were confident the early signs of neglect would be spotted. Restorative practice looked at keeping children in the home where it was safe to do so. Following cases such as Baby P there had been a significant increase in the number of children brought into the care system and a risk averse approach towards leaving them with their families. Prior to the Baby P tragedy Staffordshire had approximately 900 children in care, with this increasing to 1250 after the incident. However, national evidence showed poor outcomes for children brought into care early. The emphasis of the Children Act 1989 was for families to be kept together wherever possible and the report by Isabelle Trowler, Children's Commissioner, entitled "Clear Blue Water" noted that the scales had tipped too far in bringing children into care. Restorative practice worked with families to help give them the tools they needed to make improvements and was a model used by every outstanding rated authority.

Members noted that families with children on a Child Protection Plan (CPP) were aware of the changes needed, talking through the plan with professionals and being aware of the improvements required and the next steps should these improvements not be met. In the new model social workers and family support workers increasingly supported families in making the necessary changes. The Select Committee heard examples of this work, including providing nutritional meals within a budget and the very practical support provided to the family to help them achieve this. The Cabinet had made an £8m investment over 4 years for this work, recognising its long-term value. Members were also reminded that any decision to take a child into care or to return them to their families was one taken by the Court.

Concerns were shared over the recruitment and retention of social workers, with consideration given to possible ways to ameliorate this. The Cabinet Member was determined to use his work with West Midlands regional Lead Members and with the National Local Government Association Children's Board to push for all LAs to pay the same rate for social workers. Continuous changes to social work staff was detrimental to

the authority and the children and families they supported and every effort was being made to address this.

The SCR noted that there had been too much focus on the wishes of the mother rather than on the wishes of the children and Members asked if this emphasis in approach had changed. The new training and development plan looked at this and more widely how social workers engage with significant male family members as this was highlighted as a national issue. However, Members were also reminded that whilst this had been a terrible tragedy, the service worked with 8000 families, and whilst one tragedy was one too many there was also a need to recognise the good work within the Service.

The importance of chronologies had been raised in the SCR and was endorsed by Officers. Whilst there was no requirement to produce a chronology for Children in Need rather than those on a CPP, it was intended to capture this information from the earliest point where possible to help inform service delivery and provide a more complete picture. Multi-agency chronologies were vital in providing the necessary information and work was ongoing to improve and simplify the IT systems used to make this a more manageable process. Part of the integrated care record process was to look at how records could join-up with health colleagues. The MASH review was also critical to this information sharing work, including how referrals were made, recorded and how to avoid duplicating tasks.

The SCR had noted at recommendation 4 that core group invitations to multi-agency meetings would often see members leaving the meeting after 10 or 20 minutes as they hadn't been aware of how long the meeting would take. Members understood the suggestion that finish timescales be included but felt this wouldn't necessarily address attendees leaving the meeting early. This would be audited going forward with concerns shared with partner organisations where necessary.

The Cabinet Member explained the changing climate since the SCR, with the voice of the child central to the Service. Learning from the SCR was being embedded and incorporated into services moving forward, with the Restorative Practice model at the heart of this. He informed the Select Committee that he was greatly reassured that services were moving forward positively.

**RESOLVED:** That the learning from the SCR and its use to develop services and inform training and best practice be supported.

#### **4. Work Programme**

The Select Committee noted their work programme, with one meeting left in this municipal year on 22 April considering:

- Catch 22
- Domestic Violence
- Contextual Safeguarding review

Members were aware that this meeting would be held during purdah.

**RESOLVED:** That the work programme be noted.

**Chairman**