

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE HEALTH, CARE AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL, LLANDRINDOD WELLS, POWYS ON MONDAY, 4 FEBRUARY 2019

PRESENT

County Councillors J Charlton (in the Chair), D E Davies, H Hulme, E Jones, D Rowlands, E Vaughan and R Williams

In attendance:

D Moultrie (Lead Inspector – Care Standards Wales), A Bulman (Director of Social Services), J Coles (Head of Children’s Services), J Harris (Strategic Programme Manager – Children’s), D Jones (Professional Lead – Legal) and E Patterson (Scrutiny Officer).

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| 1. APOLOGIES |
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Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors G Williams, S Davies, J Gibson-Watt, P Pritchard, K Roberts-Jones, A Williams, J Williams, M Williams and Portfolio Holder R Powell.

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| 2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST |
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No declarations of interest were received.

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| 3. DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIPS |
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No declarations of Party Whips were received.

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| 4. CIW INSPECTION OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES |
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The Inspector presented the report drawing attention to the hard work that had been undertaken by staff and acknowledged the assistance with arrangements for the most recent inspection.

She outlined those areas where improvements had been made since the last inspection, focussed on the areas where priority actions were needed and noted there were other actions needed which were included within the body of the report.

The priority areas include:

- A clear strategic vision
- Improving strategic relationships with partners
- Improving complaints process
- Development of commissioning and practice for children’s accommodation to enable:
 - Children to be looked after closer to home
 - Fewer children placed without educational provision
- Ensure safeguarding process is multi-agency
- Ensure immediate multi-agency response to safeguard children at risk of CSE

An overview of the findings showed:

- The authority must develop a clear strategic direction and effectively translate this into a coherent operational framework for delivering services
- There was no common understanding of the approach to develop services, including preventative services, shared with the workforce and key partners
- The continued turnover in the workforce and temporary middle management arrangements have significantly impacted on the pace of change

It was the Inspector's view that plans to restructure the service, implement the signs of safety approach and establish a cohesive strategy around early help and family support should impact positively on several of the areas for action identified. However, it was not the role of the inspectorate to have a view specifically on the restructure nor on which safety model is adopted.

The Inspector concluded that since the last inspection the service had achieved significant improvements of certain areas of practice and some improvement in other areas but there continue to be other areas of practice where they have serious concerns.

Why does the Inspection Report not reference the increase in Children Looked After in Powys?

The Inspector advised that this was not included within the report as Children Looked After numbers do fluctuate but that when the Inspection team had asked Judges if cases were coming before the Courts for Care Orders which did not need to be and the Judges had indicated that this was not the case. A question arises as to what would be the level of Children Looked After if more early and edge of care help was available. However, there has been an increase in Children Looked After across Wales and the numbers are higher than in England. The availability of early help does not directly equate to the number of Children Looked After.

The Head of Service advised that in January 2018 there had been 205 Children Looked After and in December 2018 this had risen to 235. There had been an increase in Children Looked After on publication of the initial inspection report as those cases of children who had been left in dangerous situations for too long were dealt with.

Is the increase in the number of Children Looked After partly due to the authority being risk adverse since the last inspection and is the Inspector assured that the quality of decision making is appropriate?

The Inspector observed that it takes time for the results of enhanced early help to feed through. As the service improves it may be the case that children are identified who would previously have been missed. A quality assurance framework is beginning to be embedded and there is the beginnings of a culture of undertaking audits, supervising staff and recording which was not previously the case. Proper case recording is of particular importance given the turnover of staff both for present casework and in respect of children in the future understanding the reasoning behind decisions taken that affect them. This includes ensuring legal decision-making is recorded on case files.

What actions are being taken to improve the process of application for foster carers?

The Head of Service confirmed that this was an area of focus with work planned over the next few months to ensure a far more proactive and supportive approach throughout the application process.

The Inspector has indicated that a clear strategic focus with partners is needed. Could she outline what good looks like?

The Inspector noted that under the Social Services and Wellbeing Act a whole system approach is advocated. The authority work jointly with the Regional Partnership Board, Public Services Board, Regional Safeguarding Board etc. There are pockets of good practice but this has to an extent relied on personalities and more secure good practice needs to be implemented. The authority should speak to colleagues in other authorities where this is working well.

Is cultural change or process change needed? Do Social Workers speak to colleagues in health, education, the police etc?

The Head of Service confirmed colleagues do speak to colleagues in partner organisations and she now Chairs the Corporate Parenting Group and Start Well Board both of which are multi-agency.

The Director of Social Services thanked the Inspector for presenting the report and confirmed that the service fully accepted the findings of the Inspection Report as a state of the service when it was inspected in October 2018.

The Inspector left the meeting advising that whilst the Improvement Plan was due for submission the following day it was a living document and amendments could be made if necessary as a result of this scrutiny session.

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| 5. | CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT PLAN |
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The Head of Children's Services gave a presentation outlining the work that had been undertaken since the inspection in October 2018 and the Children's Services Improvement Plan December 2018 – March 2021.

- A clear vision had been circulated to staff and through the restructure it will be clear to staff that appropriate intervention should take place at the earliest time.
- A staff restructure is taking place
- The 'Signs of Safety' model of practice is being introduced
- The service will embed a practice of working with rather than doing to families.
- There will be a focus on early intervention and prevention and ensuring the right support is available at the right time.
- Recent performance data demonstrates sustained improvement over the last three months.
- The complaints process has been strengthened and the service is working with local providers in Powys to make better use of local placements although some of these are niche providers.

- There are 82 Children Looked After who are placed out of county. Work has been undertaken to bring these children back to Powys and the first cohort has returned some to a Powys foster placement and some back home with appropriate support. A second cohort has been identified.
- Further Corporate Parenting training has been provided.
- Placement Officers have been moved from Social Work teams to the Commissioning Unit which has improved placement commissioning and monitoring.
- The restructure includes an apprenticeship post for a careleaver.
- 'What good looks like' training has been undertaken
- Multi-agency strategy meetings are now taking place much more promptly unless it is a complex case
- Analysis has been undertaken as to why so many cases are closed after assessment with the intention of ensuring a more appropriate level of cases sent for assessment
- All children on Placement Orders and Care Orders placed at home have been reviewed to identify if it would be appropriate to seek to revoke an order
- The Children Leaving Care Fora has been reinstated with regular meetings arranged which the Head of Service will attend
- Access to Community Care Inform has been provided to all Social Workers to enable them to ensure their practice is up to date

A national report on fostering has recently been published which showed that almost half of foster carers would not recommend fostering.

Much work needs to be undertaken to attract and support foster carers. Work is being undertaken to provide a national level of support for foster carers. The service recognise this is an area that needs investment and there is much work to do.

One third of Children Looked After out of county is alarming. Children should not be placed far from home.

This number is too high and work is taking place to address this. It can be difficult once children are placed away and settle they may express a desire to remain in the placement. Children that are placed away are usually older and can clearly articulate their wishes.

Do Independent Reviewing Officers effectively undertake quality assurance? Is it necessary to have a manager for these few staff? Do they intervene in decision-making and is support available to them?

Independent Reviewing Officers are the only staff who are managed by Senior Managers rather than Team Managers. Employing a Team Manager will ensure that proper support and supervision is available and that they are able to escalate concerns where necessary. There are 6 Independent Reviewing Officers in the new structure.

Cllr Hulme left 12.00

The Director of Social Services left 12.00

A view was expressed that there were too many managers and too few front line staff.

The Head of Service advised that she had inherited a flawed structure and had undertaken a restructure with the intention that all posts had a manageable

workload. There should be no more than 5 gaps between frontline staff and the Chief Executive. This is being undertaken alongside the work that the Interim Chief Executive has progressed to shrink the workforce. There are some additional roles identified that are required which include a Child Sexual Exploitation Officer, Safeguarding Manager and Independent Reviewing Office Manager.

There are two main costs in Children's Services which are children in expensive placements and agency staff. It is difficult to recruit permanent staff until a job can be offered that can be done (fairly shared workload). The restructure aims to do this after which agency costs can be reduced.

What is the ideal amount of agency staff?

Agency staff are always needed for flexibility (spikes in demand, a particular issue or illness) and it is difficult to know what the 'right' level is at the moment. However, at present agency staff are being used to keep the service afloat which is not correct. Work is being undertaken linking with colleagues in HR, property, communications, WCCIS etc to reform teams and a recruitment campaign is being arranged. It will be essential to monitor progress on this as £1million of savings from the staffing budget are identified to be made by reducing dependency on agency staff.

What actions are being taken to 'grow your own' staff?

It is understood that previously it was difficult to get onto a course and these were only offered through the Open University. It will be necessary in the long term to develop links with providers at a location in Powys. In the meantime, from September 2019, the service will be offering placements for students as this can be a source of new staff.

If a foster carer moves from local authority foster caring to an independent foster caring provider what will happen to any children placed with that carer?

Children placed would not be moved if a foster carer changed providers. Foster carer recruitment and retention is an area of focus for the service and would be an appropriate area for scrutiny.

There are a number of Measures of Success contained within the report which do not appear to demonstrate that the actions undertaken will result in the outcome sought. Example include where training is identified as required the simple fact of undertaking training does not measure a change in behaviours resulting in improved outcomes or a new scrutiny structure is does not measure improved links between scrutiny and cabinet.

Recommendations:

- **That scrutiny observations on the Improvement Plan are provided to the Portfolio Holder, Director of Social Services and Head of Children's Services**
- **That scrutiny monitors the Improvement Plan to include but not exclusively the following areas:**
 - **Placement provision including out of county placements**
 - **Foster carer recruitment and retention**
 - **Partnership working**

- **That the service populates the Cabinet forward work programme to enable scrutiny to identify potential items which may benefit from pre-Cabinet scrutiny**

County Councillor J Charlton