

**Minutes of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee  
Wednesday, 11th November 2020 at 6.00 pm  
Microsoft Teams Meeting**

**Present:**

Councillor A Millward (Chair)  
Councillor P Sahota (Vice-Chair)  
Councillors M Aston, J Baines, I Bevan, P Bradley, J Cooper, S Craigie, K Lewis, C Perks and S Ridney.

**Officers:**

H Ellis (Acting Director of Children's Services), A Stone (Service Director of Children's Social Care), J Walker (Service Manager Safeguarding and Review) and K Buckle (Democratic Services Officer).

**Also In Attendance:**

One representative of Dudley Youth Council together with four Members of the Public.

---

13. **Declarations of Interest**

No Member made a Declaration of Interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in respect of any item to be considered at the meeting.

---

14. **Minutes**

**Resolved**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9th September 2020, be approved as a correct record and signed.

---

15. **Children's Services Update**

The Acting Director of Children's Services referred to the very challenging period and advised that a substantial amount of work had been undertaken to reopen some of the Children's Services buildings, with staff operating in a Covid secure manner.



The Acting Director of Children's Services referred to Children's Services objective which was to secure a permanent Leadership Team, which had resulted in the recent appointments of Nicola Hale, the new Head of Safeguarding, and Heidi Henderson, the new Head of Children in Care. It was advised that interviews for the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion were to take place imminently.

It was reported that all Contact Centres and 15 Family Centres had been open since July 2020, with the Corbyn Road facility scheduled to reopen on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2020, where the majority of social workers would be based.

Early Help and Statutory visits had continued during the pandemic, and Liquidlogic targets had been met with the programme going live on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

From an education perspective, it was reported that schools continued to be supported to remain open, although it was accepted that due to Covid-19 outbreaks some schools had had no alternative but to close. Attendance rates were 80 to 85%, which were considered good under the current circumstances, and the Acting Director of Children's Services wished to thank all schools for their hard work and efforts to remain open.

The continued improvement journey of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) was referred to, together with the continued improvements of Social Care Services.

In referring to children's social care, The Acting Director of Children Services reported that the Improvement Plan had been endorsed the previous week by the Improvement Board, with a vast majority of improvement work continuing.

The number of recorded contacts into the MASH were referred to and it commented that 1,299 contacts had been recorded in September 2020, which had reduced to 1051 in October, with on average, Early Help Services working with 1000 families.

In terms of the Ofsted Assurance Visit that was conducted between 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October, Ofsted considered findings from the Children's Services inspection that was conducted in October 2018, when the Service was judged as requiring improvement. Ofsted focused on areas of strength and improvement which were identified in the local SEND inspection carried out in May 2019, and also considered the findings from the Focus visit which was conducted in December 2019. Ofsted evaluated the experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account the Covid-19 context, how well children and young people were helped and protected and then the effectiveness of leadership and management, including the arrangements to meet the needs of children as restrictions eased during the summer. Ofsted would not include a graded judgment in the published report. The report would state whether Inspectors found any serious or widespread concerns for the welfare of children, and the report would include requirements and recommendations for improvement.

Assurances were provided that all the findings were reflected within the Children's Services Improvement Plan. Therefore, before the Focus visit, the Service already had a robust Improvement Plan, which Ofsted were provided with and they were assured that the Service was very self-aware. Children's Services received a draft letter which



was forwarded back to Ofsted challenging factual inaccuracies. That letter would be published on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

Arising from the verbal update, questions and concerns were raised and responses were provided as follows: -

- A report in relation to the Ofsted Focus Visit findings could not be prepared prior to the letter referred to above being published, as the information was currently embargoed, however the Committee would have sight of the published letter.
- In relation to the MASH referrals, a number of which had been received from Health Care Services and schools, once children returned. Upon further examination of referrals received, a number were due to a raised sense of anxiety around children, those contacts had been worked through to ensure whether they met the threshold for social care or more appropriate to be referred to Early Help Services. Work was being conducted across the partnership with the MASH Operations Group, analysing the referrals in order to have some definitive analysis to develop an understanding of the types of referrals, and arising issues which would be shared across the partnership. It was accepted that there had been a surge in referrals that should not have been referred to the MASH. Following further analysis of the referrals, an update on that analysis would be provided to the next meeting.
- In terms of communication, it was key to have clear lines of communication with front line staff, in order to ensure that Line Managers were supporting those staff. Team briefings were taking place with time for reflection, and staff were meeting in Covid secure groups. Work had been undertaken in order to re-open the Corbyn Road facility in order for staff to work with others, albeit within Covid restrictions. Assurances were provided that front line staff were fully supported, with the help of Human Resources. There was also a Counselling helpline available that provided emotional and wellbeing support.
- There were regular meetings with front line staff with a robust schedule for those meetings in place.
- The Service Director Children's Social Care reported that she had chaired a meeting with the Safeguarding Partnership, when discussions were undertaken in relation to which partnerships would be visiting families, children and young people and which visits would take place virtually. The meeting was helpful in order to ascertain which partners were undertaking visits. A number of partners were involved in the meeting including hospitals, health visiting, mental health services and the police. Meetings would continue to take place every six weeks in order to monitor those visits.
- Staff sickness levels were increasing, and sickness levels would continue to be monitored. It was noted however that not all were Covid related. Work was being conducted closely with Human Resources in order to ensure that welfare support for staff was in place.



It was accepted that front line staff sickness resulted in pressures on the remaining staff, who had to continue to deliver services. There were continuing difficulties with recruitment, due to relocation problems resulting from Covid-19.

Members thanked the Acting Director of Children's Services for the update, appreciating that these were challenging times and congratulated the service in relation to the imminent implementation of the Liquidlogic.ICT system.

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the analysis of the types of referrals into the MASH be reported on at the next meeting of the Committee.
- (2) That the information on the Children's Services update and as reported on at the meeting, be noted.

---

### 16. **Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020**

Members considered the report that provided assurances of the effective functioning of the Safeguarding and Review Service, that had operational line management of IRO's for children subject to Child Protection Plans and effective care planning for Children in Care (CIC).

The Acting Head of Safeguarding presented the report submitted, referring to the key areas of focus and updates were provided on those areas.

One of the key areas was to increase the number of children who chaired their own reviews, and a survey had been conducted, which evidenced that 30% of young people had been requested to chair their own meeting.

There had been key areas of work in relation to restorative practice, with current Child Protection Conferences working to that model.

It was noted that the IRO's role was to feed back to the Local Authority both good practice that was outlined in the report, and also pose effective challenge where children's Care Plans were experiencing drift and delay. It was stated that for the first time in Quarter 4, there was a quarterly report that outlined the activity that was taking place in relation to the number and progress of escalations.

In terms of emerging themes, the Local Authority were developing the contextual response in relation to safeguarding and were involved in auditing work that had informed the Service Plan of the areas that required improvement within the IRO Service.

The key roles and responsibilities of the IRO's were referred to, together with the additional responsibilities and the support that the IRO's provide to the Local Authority, for example attendance at the Access to Resource Panels.

The tables within the report submitted in relation to the numbers of children the IRO's had worked with across the year were noted, together with the fact that this had been relatively consistent in terms of children subject to Child Protection Plans, and the number of looked after children.

Amendments to ICT systems had been made, in order to capture the data and information from Managers on late response times to complaints, and the reasons for those late responses. That data had been collated from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, with Managers now providing information for late responses from the beginning of the financial year.

It was reported that young people and children in care had been involved with the development of the IRO Service. There were two elements to participation, the first was how children were involved in their case work, for example chairing their own IRO meetings, and secondly how children and young people shape the services.

Two consultation events had taken place with children in care, and a survey would continue to take place annually. A joint event with the Children In Care Council had also taken place with a group of young people who were met in person by Officers and also the IRO's, in order to provide support to help them facilitate their own meetings in the future. It was noted that those meetings would continue.

In relation to performance, the Timeliness of reviews was referred to and in terms of children in care reviews, the timeliness over the first part of the year was good, meeting targets at 95%, however that target had been increased to 100%.

Child Protection Conferences should be held within 15 days of the strategy discussion. The target to be met had been 80%, that had been increased to 90%, as the ambition was to continually seek to improve on targets.

In between formal meetings there were progress reviews to ensure that the children's Plans were making good progress.

The Dispute Resolution Process was referred to, with a view to the IRO providing feedback and re-assurance to the Local Authority and challenging where a Child's Plan had experienced drift or delay.

The Quarterly Reports were shared with the Department Leadership Forum, and that process had resulted in an increase in the numbers of dispute resolutions, which evidenced that IRO's were raising concerns on behalf of children and young people. The majority were resolved informally through conversations initially.

It was reported that the majority of disputes were in relation to pathways or care plans not being completed in timescales, or there were outstanding actions on the Plan.

Those concerns were reflected in the Informal Dispute Resolutions that had been proceeded to the second stage in the resolution process.

In relation to best practice, the example of a Duty Social Worker who had continued to work with a 17 year old to ensure that the young person was appropriately prepared and supported with securing a grant for a laptop and furniture for her new property, was outlined.

The business support that supported the effective delivery of positive outcomes for children and young people was outlined.

Areas for improvement included parent participation, improving access to advocacy services and also meeting performance targets and it was reported that the IRO's were driving a broader role of improvement across Social Work teams.

The aim of the Service objectives for the current financial year were for one form of feedback and consultation to take place every other month, which would include partner agencies and parents, for both child protection and children looked after.

It was stated that business support had been strengthened in relation to reviews, the completion of a 'You Said We Did' poster following the consultation that had taken place earlier in the year, and a number of Working Groups had been established in order to further strengthen participation within the service.

In relation to improving the use of advocacy, that would continue to be discussed with IRO's during their annual appraisals, supervision and team meetings. IRO's now met with the Advocacy Services to ensure the use of advocacy continued to take place.

In relation to effective challenge the robustness of increasing challenge had taken place in order that statutory timelines were met.

The learning and development offer in order to strengthen the IRO's ability to carry out their key roles and functions were referred to.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted Members made comments and asked questions and Officers responded as follows: -

- The implementation of Liquidlogic ICT systems within Children's Services would facilitate monitoring in relation to progress reviews.
- In terms of children and young people participating in their reviews, there were two levels of participation, one was being actively involved within their case work and the second was consultation.
- Consultations with children and young people were necessary in order to gather evidence in relation to the services being offered and whether those services required improvements. Methods of consultation would be examined in order to improve the participation strategy.



- It was accepted that Covid-19 had impacted on IRO Service development.
- The data in relation to black male and female IRO's would be included in future reports in relation to the Service.
- Virtual meetings were taking place and targets continued to be met.
- The percentage figures in relation to those who chaired their own meetings were calculated from a survey and were not representative of the overall cohort.
- Consultations and surveys were undertaken in order to improve services.
- One of the targets for IRO's was to provide facilitation for children and young people to feel confident to chair their own reviews.
- It was accepted that caseloads were high within the care management service, as there had been an increase in referrals, and Head of Services were ensuring that the correct cases were being dealt with in the correct services, as it had become apparent that some referrals needed to be transferred to Early Help and Universal services.
- Methods of reporting would be investigated as the report presented only provided data up until March 2020.
- A participation stream had commenced in order to capture the voices of children and young people. There was a Service Plan for the Review Unit, with work commencing during the first week in December in order to investigate how to engage with children, young people and their families.

## **Resolved**

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted on the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, be noted.
- (2) That as part of the children and young people's reviews, the IRO's be requested to consult with children and young people in order to capture the voice of the child and improve and develop services.



## 17. Fostering and Permanence Service Update Report

Members considered the report in relation to Dudley's Fostering and Permanence Service.

The Service Director of Children's Social Care presented the report submitted referring to paragraphs of significant importance.

In relation to recruitment, the Recruitment and Fostering Team continued to work in order to increase the range of foster carers and recruit those who could support more challenging children.

It was noted that should it be possible to return children and young people back to their families, that would remain a priority.

Adoption for children was located within the Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption@Heart. This Agency was also utilised by Wolverhampton and Sandwell.

The different settings for the 635 children in care in Dudley were referred to, together with the work being conducted with Commissioning Services to examine the need for the looked after children population to ensure that the correct provision for children in care was being delivered. There was the ambition to keep children in settings where they were close to their existing schools and local areas.

Although it had not been possible to deliver virtual training during the pandemic, young people had been provided with boxes which included equipment and activities for improving their mental health, however this would be reviewed with the new Head of Children in Care once in post.

In relation to permanency for children, decisions were required to be made on a timely basis and plans for children were regularly monitored for each and every one of those children in care in order to proactively drive those plans forward.

In relation to adoption, every other possibility for permanence would have been examined prior to the adoption, with evidence gathering and consultation with Legal Services taking place in relation to securing permanency for a child.

Arising from the presentation of the report, Members asked questions and the Service Director of Children's Social Care responded as follows: -

- In relation to the four children in Fostering for Adoption placements, it was confirmed that these children were still children for adoption. There were adopters who were willing to be foster carers, in order to prevent moves for children. Some clarification would be provided in relation to those children who were in fostering to adopt settings, for fostering purposes only and those who were to be adopted.

- In terms of Adopton@Heart, an email to the Regional Service Directors had been received from Mark Tobin, the Head of Service, in relation to lots of activity to increase the diversity of adopters, as ideally there would be an ethnic match where that was possible. Within the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community there were fewer who were willing to adopt. Within the Regional Adoption Agency work in relation to diverse recruitment was taking place and the Service Director of Children's Social Care expressed the desire to be part of that work. It was reported that Members would be appraised of the outcome of that work at a future meeting of the Committee.
- Unregulated provision was not regulated by Ofsted, although that was being debated across the Country. Within Dudley young people and children under the age of 16 were not placed in unregulated provision, and work was being conducted with colleagues across the council to examine those placements, with visits regularly taking place to those unregulated provisions. There was also a Forum that considered those provisions. Work continued with the Police and housing colleagues and should issues arise support would be put into place. The Improvement Plan and the work being conducted with Commissioning partners formed part of that work stream.
- Previously there had not been the correct amount of rigour on progressing permanency, however, should it have been determined that a child would be adopted, meetings were conducted every fortnight, and work would continue order to progress adoptions on a timely basis.
- The 'Reflect Project' was referred to, whereby work was conducted to put support in place for a family who had previously had a child removed from their home.
- There was a national problem in relation to in-house fostering provision and the Government had launched a review in care provision and sufficiency and accommodation for children. The Local Authority's Children's Services would be involved in the review.
- Planned work on a sufficiency strategy in relation to foster carers would take place.
- The status of the Resource Panel that was chaired by the Acting Director of Children's Services would be enhanced in order to ensure that every child was in the right placement. Lifting the status of Dudley's resource panel to ensure for every child the right place was identified.
- The Acting Director of Children's Services provided assurances that within the Children's Services Improvement Plan, permanency for children was an absolute priority and work would be conducted to drive through that immediate action and further updates would be provided to the Committee.



## Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted on Dudley's Fostering and Permanence Service, be noted.
- (2) That further updates in relation to Dudley's Fostering and Permanence Services be submitted to future meetings of the Committee.
- (3) That the Acting Head of Children's Services be requested to provide clarification in relation to the number of children who were in fostering to adopt settings, for fostering purposes only or were to be adopted.

---

### 18. **Children in Care and Care Leaver Service – Care Leavers Update Report**

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted on the scope and detail in relation to Dudley Care Leavers.

The Service Director of Children's Social Care presented the report submitted, advising that a care leaver was defined as a young person aged 16 to 25 years.

The Care Leaver strategy 2016 was referred to, together with the five key outcome areas that Dudley should seek to achieve for all young people leaving care.

It was reported that during the recent Ofsted visit, Officers had commented positively on the support provided to young people during Covid-19, referring specifically to the WhatsApp method of keeping in contact with children and young people.

It was further noted that there were extremely strong relationships with young people and their Youth Participation Workers.

It was reported that Dudley currently had 16 young people at university studying courses from Social Work Degrees to Masters Degrees in advanced Chemistry.

The aspirations were for young people to have the same opportunities as those who were not looked after children.

The caseloads of a Young Persons Advisor were referred to, together with the proportion of care leavers accessing education, employment and training.

In relation to the work of Black Country Impact with 13 to 29 year olds in 2018, it was recognised that this required re-visiting and the programme of work would be re-considered, due to the benefit that work provided to children and young people previously.

It was reported that a review of the Pledge and Local Offer for care leavers may take place and it was intended to involve care leavers with that review.

The Chair commented positively on the offer to care leavers and also on the work of the Children's Corporate Parenting Board and Councillor Paul Bradley in relation to securing a council tax exemption for all care leavers, and also the fact that several care leavers were attending University.

The Chair also referred to the need to encourage those who were awarded contracts with the Local Authority, to offer apprenticeships to care leavers, and the possibility of consulting with housing colleagues in order to achieve this. It was also suggested that the public sector partners be approached in that regard, for example the Police and Health partners.

A Member suggested that the above be discussed at the Children's Corporate Parenting Board, as this had been raised at a previous Board meeting but not progressed. The same Member also suggested that when procuring or commissioning contracts, part of the negotiations should include the possibility of offering apprenticeships to care leavers.

It was also suggested that sections of the report submitted should also be presented to the Children's Corporate Parenting Board.

Members echoed the positive comments of the Chair in relation to care leavers attending University.

There followed a request that Members be provided with data in terms of percentages of care leavers attending further education or obtaining employment and the outcomes for those young people.

Details of the profiles of Young People's Advisors was also requested.

The Acting Director of Children's Services undertook to obtain a breakdown of destinations in relation to care leavers.

The need for the Local Authority to provide a base for young people to meet with their Advisors was also required, and it was suggested that the Council's former Children's Home in Brierley Hill could be utilised for that purpose. It was agreed that this item would be discussed at the Children's Corporate Parenting Board.

There followed a request that data be provided on the numbers of females and males who were not in education, employment or training.

The Chair referred to the need for a Champion for Children in Care.

## Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted on the Care Leavers Service, be noted.
- (2) That the Children in Care and Care Leaver Service – Care Leavers Update Report be submitted to a meeting of the Children’s Corporate Parenting Board.
- (3) The Acting Director of Children’s Services be requested to: -
  - (a) Refer the suggestion to encourage those who were awarded contracts with the Local Authority to offer apprenticeships to care leavers, and the possibility of consulting with Housing colleagues in order to achieve that to the Children’s Corporate Parenting Board.
  - (b) Provide Members with data in terms of percentages of care leavers attending further education or obtaining employment and the outcomes for those young people.
  - (c) Provide Members with details of profiles of Young People Advisors.
  - (d) Consider the possibility of utilising the Council’s former Children’s Home in Brierley Hill for a base for young people to meet their Young People’s Advisor.
  - (e) Provide Members with a breakdown of the number of females and males not in education, employment or training.

---

### 19. Closing Remarks of the Chair

This being the last meeting of the Year, the Chair wished Members a Merry Christmas.

The meeting ended at 7.42pm

CHAIR

