

Strong Families, Children, and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 13 July 2022

Attendance

Members of the Strong Families, Children, and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Rita Potter (Chair)
Cllr Paul Sweet
Cllr Qaiser Azeem
Cllr Adam Collinge (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Stephanie Haynes
Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre
Cllr Carol Hyatt
Cllr Andrew McNeil
Cllr Louise Miles
Cllr Lynne Moran

Co-opted Members

Wolverhampton Youth Council

Employees

Alison Hinds
Jennifer Rogers
Alice Vickers

Deputy Director of Children's Social Care
Principal Social Worker
Co-production and Youth Engagement
Manager
Scrutiny Officer

Earl Piggott-Smith

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Welcome and Introductions**
Cllr Rita Potter, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised it was also being live streamed to the press and public.
- 2 **Meeting procedures to be followed**
Cllr Potter explained the process to be followed during the meeting for asking questions.
- 3 **Apologies**
Apologies were received from the following member of the panel:

Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur

Apologies were also received from Emma Bennett, Executive Director Families.

4 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Minutes of the previous meeting (24 March 2022)**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 24 March 2022 be approved as a correct record.

6 **Minutes of the previous meeting (23 June 2022) (report to follow)**

The panel approved the draft minutes of 23 June 2022 as a correct subject to the amendment to the list of attendees. Cllr Ellis Turrell to be recorded as being in attendance as a substitute for Cllr Stephanie Haynes

The panel queried the reason for delay in publishing the papers for the meeting and expressed concern about the problems caused when papers are published separately. Alison Hinds, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care, apologised and advised the panel that due to employee absences there was a delay in getting reports ready in time to meet the publication deadline.

7 **Children and Young People Social Work Self Evaluation (report to follow)**

The Chair invited Alison Hinds, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care, to present the report.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that the purpose of the report was to give a summary of the findings of the annual self-evaluation of Children Services in Wolverhampton. The completion of the report is a requirement under the Ofsted inspection framework and is prepared at the end of each financial year and refreshed annually at the end of September. The evaluation of the service covers all areas of social care provision, from early help intervention offer to adoption services and onto specialist services.

The Deputy Director listed the achievements of Children's Services in 2021-2022 and the areas for development in 2022- 2023. The Deputy Director commented that she was proud of the service in managing the demand across the social care system. The service has continued to offer the right level of support to children and families at the right place and time, which has reduced the need for higher levels of statutory intervention.

The Chair thanked the presenter for the excellent report on the performance of the service.

The Chair invited panel members to comment on the report.

The panel queried the reasons for the 25 per reduction in the timeliness of Children In Need (CIN) assessments being completed since September 2021.

The Deputy Director of Children's Social Care advised the panel that due to the difficulty in recruiting good quality agency social work staff over the previous 12 months there has been a reduction in the number of assessments being completed.

The Deputy Director outlined plans to address the issue and reassured the panel that the children concerned would have a social worker going into to see them regularly. The service is working hard to improve the performance figures.

The panel queried the reasons for the increase between January and April 2021 in the number of children and young people registered as Elective Home Education, following a previous period when the numbers had fallen.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that the service saw an increase in the number of children and young people being home educated during the pandemic and accepted the need to look at reasons for the change. The Deputy Director reassured the panel that there are clear processes where families who may be thinking of home education are contacted to talk about the reasons for them wanting this and the service will work with them to find a possible solution.

The Deputy Director added that parents have the choice to home educate their children.

The panel welcomed the effort to make sure where possible that only those children that need to come into care come are placed there.

The panel queried the number of children and young people who have not been placed with an adoptive family.

The Deputy Director commented that the actual numbers would be sent separately as not immediately available. The service continues to work with Adoption@Heart to review the cases of children that are on the waiting list to make sure the plan is right for them.

The panel discussed the reference in the report to safeguarding children who may have witnessed domestic abuse. There was concern about the delays in the police responding to reports from schools and wanted more details about the process.

The panel also expressed concern about the risk of young people being exploited through their involvement in drugs and may already be known to the service and the extent to which current resources are available to support them at a time when social work caseloads are increasing. The panel shared examples of young people involved in drugs within their ward.

The Deputy Director commented on the work of Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH 24) which has a crucial role in tackling the issues highlighted. The service provides a multi-agency role with representation from the police and other

The Deputy Director highlighted the work of Power2 team in working with young people at risk of exploitation and engaged in high-risk taking behaviour.

The Deputy Director reassured the panel that the issue of exploitation is taken seriously and outlined other measures, such as a screening tool to help partners identify children at risk and there is an expectation that professionals will make referrals to MASH 24 if there are concerns.

The panel expressed concern about the reference in the report to number of children missing education whose whereabouts are not known to the service and asked for further details.

The Deputy Director commented that this issue is covered in more detail the next agenda item. The report from Ofsted made a recommendation following their review about the issue of children missing education and the report details the action plan to respond to this.

The panel discussed the issue of reporting to the police in cases of domestic violence involving children and was advised that a referral would be made to the child protection team automatically in such circumstances. The police when attending an incident involving domestic violence would send a report to the MASH 24 team.

The panel queried the reference in the report to learning from Child R case and the reference to professionals needed to be reminded when there is an injury to a non-mobile baby, that child protection procedures should be followed.

Jenny Rogers, Principal Social Worker, advised the panel that following a review there will be learning outcomes document which will lead to the publication of a multi-agency action plan.

The Principal Social Worker highlighted the need to remind social workers about good basic practice and to reflect and learn from the incidents such as the Child R case.

The panel queried the increase from the previous year about the number of children missing from home and the reference in the Ofsted report that return to home interviews were not being completed. The panel highlighted the importance of understanding the reasons for the absence but accepted that the young person may not want to engage with the service. The panel requested details of what further actions could be taken to reduce the numbers of children missing from home.

The Deputy Director commented on the changes in the number of children missing from homes during the pandemic and figures have fluctuated. The Deputy Director confirmed in response to the issue the has capacity of the missing exploitation team has increased, while accepting that some children may choose not to take up the offer, but as part of the action plan the service is thinking more creatively about how to engage with young people.

The panel wanted to formally congratulate the performance of the service and the excellent Ofsted inspection report about the work done to help and support children and young people in Wolverhampton.

The panel queried the different categories of 'serious', 'significant' and 'at risk' in the child exploitation figures and how the decision to made about which category a young person fits into.

The Deputy Director responded that in general the categories are based on level of risk. A decision about the level of risk would be based a multi-agency assessment which would include details about the level of intervention needed to support the young person. The level of risk to the young person would also be reviewed over time.

The panel thanked the Deputy Director for the presentation.

Resolved:

1. The panel asked for its comments on the report to be noted.

2. The panel endorsed the recommendations in the Children's Service Self Evaluation 2022-2023 report.

8 **Draft Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (LACS) action plan (report to follow)**

The Chair invited Alison Hinds, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care, to present the report.

The Deputy Director outlined the action plan and proposed process for monitoring progress following the Ofsted inspection of the City of Wolverhampton Local Authority Children's Service.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that Ofsted undertook a short inspection of Children's Services between 21 March 2022 and 1 April 2022. The inspection covered the following areas - services for children and families needing help and protection and children and young people in care and care leavers.

The Deputy Director commented that since the last inspection by Ofsted the rating of the service for children and families needing help has been assessed as 'good', previously it was rated as 'requires improvement'. The service has maintained an Ofsted rating of 'good' for service for children and young people in care and care leavers.

There is a Government consultation about making changes to the inspection criteria which would put the grading for care leavers services into a separate category in future Ofsted inspections. The Deputy Director commented that this proposal would be welcomed by the Council in the response to the consultation.

The Deputy Director commented that the assessment for the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families was rated as 'outstanding' by the inspectors; it was previously rated as 'good'. The Deputy Director welcomed the recommendations from Ofsted and highlighted the reference to areas for improvement, for example, the arrangements for the tracking and monitoring children who are missing from education.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that an action plan had been produced which will be sent to Ofsted in August 2022.

The panel were invited to comment on the report and the action plan.

The panel welcomed the positive report and congratulated the service on its performance.

The panel queried if the availability of housing near a parent's preferred school was an issue in the numbers of children and young people missing from education who were allocated a school further away. The panel also commented on the issue of children needing to take several buses to get to school because of the high demand for local places and queried the advice given to parents to engage them in discussion about their school preferences.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that in the example given this would probably relate to a situation where a family has moved because of an emergency.

The Deputy Director reassured the panel that the service works with colleagues in housing to enable children to attend the nearest local school where possible. The Deputy Director commented on the change role of the Virtual School Head to include families who may have been contacted by a social worker in the past to offer them advice support and advice in this situation.

The panel highlighted the issue of families with children with no recourse to public funds after being granted permission to stay being asked to move home at short notice to a location some distance from a school. The panel queried if children in this situation would be included in the data about children missing from school and if families in this situation are monitored by the service.

The Deputy Director reassured the panel that the service works closely to support families who have no recourse to public funds to help them to settle into their new home and school. The Deputy Director accepted that the situation is not ideal as families may be living in another local authority area and not always be known to the service.

The Deputy Director offered to meet with outside of the meeting if panel members had cases involving families with no recourse to public funds.

The panel queried the support in situations where children are being presented as homeless and the advice given about their rights in this situation. The Deputy Director advised the panel that where a young person aged 16 or 17 is at risk of homelessness then the service would work with colleagues in housing to do an assessment. The Deputy Director commented that the issue of the support for homeless young people had been identified previously and outlined a range of actions, for example, providing information in different formats about the support on offer.

The panel discussed the difficulties facing schools wanting to expand capacity and reduction in national funding for building maintenance as factors in reference to the previous point about parents not being able to get their preferred choice of school.

The panel thanked the Deputy Director for the report.

The panel queried the meaning of the colour code RAG rating in the action plan. The Deputy Director advised the panel that the service uses blue to show the action as being completed, green is on track and red or amber when there are concerns that progress for the action may not be on track.

Resolved:

1. The panel welcomed the report and congratulated the service on the progress made.
2. The panel comments to be noted.
3. The Deputy Director of Children's Social Care to send a final draft of the action plan to the panel after it has been shared with Ofsted in August 2022.

The Principal Social Worker advised the panel that the annual report covers social work practice across both Children's and Adult's Services. The Principal Social Worker outlined the main highlights in the report, with a focus on performance of social work practice in Children's Services.

The Principal Social Worker commented on the work being done to strengthen existing quality assurance activity, responding to the challenges in terms of the recruitment and retention of social workers, the ongoing focus on tackling inequality and raising the profile of social work profession, and supporting excellence in social work practice.

The Principal Social Worker outlined the responsibilities of the role and the key priorities for 2022-2023.

The Principal Social Worker commented on the strong improvement in the quality of social work practice and highlighted the increase in the number case files rated as 'good' or 'outstanding' as an example of the progress made. The Principal Social Worker highlighted the commitment to quality assurance which was recognised by Ofsted following their inspection in March 2022.

The Principal Social Worker commented on the annual joint social work conference in Wolverhampton which was attended by adults and children's social worker. The theme for this year's conference was celebrating diversity, challenging inequality with conference speakers sharing their lived experiences of discrimination. The feedback from the conference has been very positive from social workers that attended.

The Principal Social Worker commented that the work of six social workers in Wolverhampton were recognised by the British Association of Social Work and awarded the title of amazing social worker in 2022. In addition, 70 social workers have been supported to engage with the national review of independent children's social care and contributed to the recommendations.

The Principal Social Worker gave details about the range of work being done to challenge inequality and the promotion and to further embed equality, diversity, and inclusion in areas of social work practice and policy.

The Principal Social Worker outlined the key priorities of the role as detailed in the work plan for 2022-2023 and highlighted the importance of having highly skilled social workers to help reduce the risk of children being taken into care and supporting adults with care and support needs to remain or become independent for as long as possible.

The Principal Social Worker commented on the need to build on the successful Ofsted report and to prepare for future inspections, to maintain links with other Principal Social Workers across the region that can help shape policy and practice locally and influence national policies.

The panel were invited to comment on the report.

The panel welcomed the report and the outstanding inspection report from Ofsted on the service and the achievements made during the year.

The panel queried the progress to the reference made in previous annual report about actions aimed at increasing the number of audits following a reduction during

the pandemic. The Principal Social Worker commented on the changes made to increase the number of audits from the period during the pandemic, for example, doing them during social work practice weeks to reduce social worker workloads.

The panel queried the impact of the introduction of the new IT system on reducing workloads and duplication highlighted in previous annual report.

The Principal Social Worker advised the panel that the Eclipse IT system has really helped to reduce workloads and the duplication of recording. There are still work needed to smooth issues with the system but the response from social workers has been positive about the new system. The service is regularly reviewing and making changes to the system, which is being supported by advanced social work practitioners. The Deputy Director added that there is work being done to utilise the system more effectively, for example, there is no facility to record voice messages. The changes would allow social workers to record notes following their visits which will help to further reduce workloads.

The panel discussed the challenges facing the service in terms of the recruitment and retention of experienced social workers at a time when there is such a high demand for people with such skills and experience. The panel welcomed the initiatives detailed in the report to recruit and retain social but had concerns about ongoing workforce challenges nationally caused by the high turnover and vacancy rates and the reliance on agency staff across the public sector generally.

The panel queried the caseload numbers of social workers. The Principal Social Worker commented that there is not typical caseload as it will depend on the complexity of the cases being managed. The Principal Social Worker highlighted the importance of good supervision sessions with social workers about their skills and experience to talk about how they are managing their current workload. There are different caseload levels for newly qualified social workers, and they also have a protected caseload which will be increased gradually when supervisors are confident, that they can manage.

In addition, work is also being done to manage caseloads using peripatetic teams and speeding up social work recruitment to help stabilise teams and to help keep casework workloads as low as possible.

The panel discussed the impact of the pandemic on social workers and the introduction of flexible working. The Principal Social Worker commented on the challenges experienced by social workers in managing home schooling and other caring responsibilities and advised the panel that the service has recognised that social workers may need to work outside normal hours or in the evenings. In such situations social workers are encouraged to use toil accrued and have conversations about the wellbeing and offering training and support which is an important area of work.

The panel thanked the presenter for the report and the progress made.

Resolved:

The panel endorsed the recommendations in the report and priorities identified for the 2022 – 2023 by the Principal Social Worker.

10 **Strong Families ,Children and Young People - Draft Scrutiny Work Programme 2022- 2023**

The Chair invited Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, to present the report.

The Scrutiny outlined future items on the draft work programme. The panel were invited to comment and or make suggestions to the work programme. The panel suggested that an item on Education Bill could be added to panel work programme.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the draft work programme report