

**CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

MEETING, 6TH SEPTEMBER, 2021

Present – Councillors Grant (Vice-Chairman), Abdullah, Adia, Dean, Donaghy, Hill, Murray, Pattison, Rimmer and Taylor-Burke

Co-opted Members

None

Also in attendance

Councillor Galloway	-	Executive Cabinet Member – Children's Services
Ms B. Brown	-	Director of Children's Services
Mr I. Walker	-	Assistant Director – Social Care and Early Help
Dr H. Wall	-	Bolton CCG
Ms R. Season	-	Bolton CCG
Mrs V. Ridge	-	Democratic Services Manager

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Connor, Hornby, Iqbal (Chairman), Ismail and McGeown and from Reverend Canon Dr Bracegirdle and Ms J. Bond (Co-opted Members)

Councillor Grant in the Chair.

7. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved - The minutes of the proceedings of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held on 27th July, 2021 were submitted and signed as a correct record.

8. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22

The Borough Solicitor submitted the Committee Work Programme for 2021/22.

Resolved – That the 2021/22 Committee Work Programme be noted.

9. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH

Further to Minute 5 of the meeting of this Committee held on 27th July, 2021, Dr H. Wall gave a presentation on the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's mental health.

The presentation provided details in relation to the national picture and gave an in-depth analysis of how children and young people had been affected locally by the Pandemic.

The following points were highlighted:

- data from the 0-19 service had shown an increase in children and young people who had low health and wellbeing scores on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale and numbers referred through emotional health and wellbeing care pathways and to specialist mental health services;
- 0-19 Service data also appeared to show a rise in perinatal mental health issues with an increase in mothers' scoring above the threshold on the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale, although this should be interpreted with caution due to small numbers;
- Bolton Together had also reported a rise in demand for their more intensive one to one support since the Pandemic began, and report that young people generally would prefer face to face interaction than online support, as they were suffering "Zoom fatigue", in the same way

many adults working from home were, from so much time online for schooling and other aspects of their social lives; and

- all services had reported an increase in acuity and complexity which could not be demonstrated within local data. Bolton's JSNA was currently under development and was capturing this qualitative feedback across services.

The presentation went on to provide various slides that gave an overview of service data across Bolton.

In relation to Bolton CAMHS referrals:

- in 2019/20 there were a total of 2605 referrals - this reduced significantly over the pandemic with 1477 referrals made in 2020/21.
- Bolton CAMHS were now seeing an increased demand with 462 referrals being made within the first two months of 2021/22 – this was 77 more than the same time period in 2019/20 and 292 more than in 2020/21 (April – May).

The presentation advised that Children and Young People Access to Mental Health Treatment was a national requirement set out within the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health (2016). By 2020/21, localities must ensure that 35% of children and young people with a diagnosable mental health condition receive NHS funded treatment which consisted of at least 2 meaningful contacts within the reporting period.

For 2020/21, Bolton achieved an access rate of 35.4%. This figure was solely based on data submitted to the Mental Health Services Data Set did not currently include any access to treatment through Bolton's VCSE mental health offer in addition to treatment for autism through Community Paediatric. Work was ongoing to address the underreporting with NHS Digital to support our VCSE colleagues to stream data to the Date Set.

For 2021/22, the current forecasting rate of a CYP Access was 48.5% based on a 57.9% access rate in April followed by 36.9% in May. April access rates were always significantly higher as CYP could be counted again within the new Financial Year.

With regard to Kooth registrations, members were advised that:

- in 2020/21 a total of 1,750 new registrations were made to Bolton's online counselling platform for 11 – 25 year olds. Despite a lack of face-to-face promotion of Kooth by Bolton's allocated Integration and Participation worker, the registrations remained consistent with 2019/20 where a total of 1,731 new registrations were reported.
- a total of 14,235 logins from 2205 individual young people were made to the service across the financial year. A total of 450 1:1 counselling sessions also took place.
- whilst the neighbourhood overview about did not account for population size, registrations were more frequent in Farnworth & Kearsley and Crompton & Halliwell; and
- the most prominent issues Kooth presented with were reported each quarter - anxiety/Stress remained the more common presenting issue across each quarter with suicidal thoughts appearing second in Quarters 2, 3 and 4.

With regard to all age mental health liaison:

- completed assessments by Bolton's All Age Mental Health Liaison Service had been consistent across financial years with 400 completed assessments in 2019/20 compared to 398 in 2020/21; and
- on average, children aged 16 and under accounted for 9% of the total AAMHL assessments taking place each month. This fluctuated across the Financial Year with 4% in July, 2020 rising to 14% in November 2020.

The presentation also referred to eating disorder care pathways and Bolton, together with the other 9 localities across Greater Manchester were performing significantly better than the North West and England as a whole.

Members were advised that Bolton Together had utilised part of the monies secured through The Lottery Recovery Fund to deliver three engagement sessions to 73 young people across Bolton relating to the impact of Covid-19 on Children and Young People.

The presentation went on to summarise what young people had said about Covid-19:

- an overwhelming use of fear in the media had a huge impact on SEND children and young people. Avoiding common taglines like 'stay safe' was important as to a literal thinker that would imply that we were in danger or not safe.
- many LGBT+ young people felt they hadn't struggled with not being able to go out to a great extent as they were in a loving home, although boredom had become a major theme as lockdowns progressed;
- those who were shielding felt isolation the most as they hadn't left the house properly in for almost a year.
- the cancellation of exams had caused worry for some and left them feeling disappointed in their results;
- young people from the secondary schools commented on 'negative media narratives' focused on the BAME community which have led to an erosion of trust in the press;
- young people reported less exercise and some weight gain; and

- families of children and young people with SEND also reported the difficulties during lockdown with a particular focus on home schooling, the difficulties in providing the same level of support, having to become teachers and using the home as a classroom.

In summary, the presentation outlined the findings and experiences arising from the last year:

- the experience had been different for every young person and there was a need to take a person-centred approach to support and allow time for children and young people to adjust to a changing environment;
- COVID-19 had led to different anxieties but also the emergence of different coping mechanisms which needed continued encouragement and support;
- the need for children and young people to know what information and support was available in a range of formats which was timely and transparent;
- the need for children and young people to feel connected to others and their community, providing accessible opportunities to connect, integrate and be active and the removal of barriers of cost, lack of awareness or fear would help;
- young people wanted services to continue to listen to them and to act on what they told us; and
- talk openly about mental health and ways to support good mental health.

The presentation also identified what mental health support was listed all the services that were available across Bolton. Full details of each initiative and how they were accessed were provided.

Following the presentation, members made the undermentioned comments/observations:

- the importance of mental health provision in schools – members were advised that the Team Around Schools Programme was operational in 13 schools across the Borough aimed at early intervention and prevention. Trauma staff were based there who worked in conjunction with the Local Authority with a focus on building a community for young people with engagement. There were plans to expand these services and provide more investment next year with practitioners based in schools and linking in with CAMHS;
- the need to educate children in mainstream schools about mental health issues and raise awareness – members were advised that this was an important aspect of the engagement strategy and would be individualised dependent on differing needs within schools;
- the part played by schools was vital – Ms Brown advised that schools were aware of the issues with some being proactive and already utilising their resources for mental health support such as Turton School who had appointed two mental health nurses. The SEND Steering Group and Head Teacher Executive Groups were also working together to raise awareness of the huge scale and range of services that were available although more work on this was needed;
- concerns that the lasting effects of the stop/start situation of children's schooling associated with the pandemic over the past eighteen months may not materialise for many years and was a new pressure that Authority would have to face – members were advised that schools were aware of the possible adverse effects of the disrupted schooling on children and that the Early Help and Integrated Front Door services would help to support schools in this area and assist them in early intervention to mitigate them;
- the role of GPs in supporting children – Dr Wall advised that the Thrive One Door initiative was revolutionising and simplifying how GPs could access mental health services by referral to a single point of contact;

- mental health was everyone's concern and a whole system approach was needed; and
- an awareness that the pressures and struggles of parents during the pandemic had been felt by children.

Resolved – That Dr Wall be thanked for her informative presentation.

10. FOSTERING

Mr I Walker gave a presentation on fostering in Bolton with a particular focus on the recruitment of foster carers.

Members were advised that 2020/21 had resulted in the highest number of enquiries over the past 5 years due to a rolling marketing campaign being delivered for the first time and the creation of a dedicated Marketing Officer:

- 363 new enquiry leads were received during the period 1st April – 31st March 2020;
- an 81% increase in enquiries from 2019/20 figures;
- most popular months for enquiries were May (which incorporated Foster Care Fortnight), June, January and September, which coincided with the months in which the digital marketing campaign was active; and
- 76 enquirers went on to complete a Registration of Interest (ROI).

The presentation also advised that:

- 60% of all enquiry leads and 26% of all ROIs had come through Facebook advertising;
- 30% of all enquiry leads and 54% of all ROIs had come through the Bolton fostering web form on the Council's website;
- visits to the fostering web pages had increased by an average of 89% during months when the paid digital campaign was active; and
- the Paid Search campaign accounted for approximately 50% of direct visits to the Council fostering web pages.

Enquiries had come from a broad geographical area of Bolton:

- 85% of enquiries received had been from women;
- 24% of enquiries were from the BAME community;
- 15% of enquirers had no spare room.

In terms of recruitment, the presentation informed members that:

- the Fostering Service had been reorganised to create a dedicated Recruitment Team to provide more timely responses, grip and drive;
- a tracker had been devised for assessments with clear headlines and timescales to ensure senior management oversight and facilitate challenge in Performance Board;
- there was a clear target timescale set for allocating ROI and completing initial visits and assessments;
- schedule of rolling program of Skills to Foster training courses to avoid built in delays;
- assessments were booked into panel upon allocation of an assessing social worker with a 6-month target for completion of the assessment; and
- Stages 1 and 2 of the assessment process ran concurrently to reduce assessment timescales.

With regard to the forecast for 2021/22:

- there was a projection of 20 approved carers in 2021/2022 which was double the number of carers from 2020/2021;
- a rollover of the impact of improved marketing should extend the improvement into 2022/23; and
- retention of carers also improving with 13 resignations in 2020/21 as compared to 19 in 2019/20.

The presentation also made the following points in respect of the fostering career:

- there were currently 192 mainstream foster carer households providing 241 placements – the third best

performing Local Authority in the GMCA for placing children 'in-house';

- there were 69 family and friends placements but still had 73 Independent Fostering Agency placements - however, 44 were over the age of 60 so over the next 5 years may have to recruit up to 8 carers a year just to 'stand still';
- average age of mainstream foster carers was between 45 and 59 and on average fostered for Bolton for 9 years, with 10% of carers fostering with the Authority for between 20 and 40 years and 37% between 10 and 20 years;
- information gathered from various forums suggested foster carers felt supported by their Supervising Social Workers - when the decision was made to leave fostering it was often due to retirement;
- foster carer representative on the Corporate Parenting Board to ensure their views were represented; and
- there was a tracker in place to monitor and review void placements for senior manager oversight to best ensure maximum efficiency in the system.

In respect of retention, the presentation also referred to:

- a monthly newsletter distributed to carers to ensure they were kept up to date with any developments and share information about resources and topics of interest;
- a range of support groups available to carers and children which had continued during the Covid 19 pandemic;
- Voice 4 You event annually to celebrate the achievements of our Looked after Children;
- Buddy System to ensure all carers were linked to an experienced foster carer to provide them with guidance and support;
- discount card for carers to ensure accessibility to a range of activities;
- the Foster Carer Forum ensured carers met regularly with the manager to share their views, concerns and compliments;

- celebration events for long standing foster carers recognising their continued service to the department and the children of Bolton;
- involvement of foster carers in our recruitment activities such as during skills to foster training; and
- foster carers supporting with initial visits to utilise their skills, knowledge and experience.

Future developments included:

- pooling resources and expertise with other GM Authorities such as home adaptation scheme, joined up marketing campaign on a sub-regional basis and development of a recruitment/enquiry/assessment hub;
- a deep dive into fostering data and continued evaluation of recruitment activity which was reviewed through the recruitment meetings;
- continue to build on foster carer recruitment year on year underpinned by high quality recruitment activity; and
- possible Mockingbird model to be launched in Bolton to enrich placement stability, retention and enhance the current short break offer.

The presentation concluded that Bolton needed foster carers as too many children were still being placed out of Borough and in more expensive IFA placements where outcomes were less certain. Significant progress has been made but more work needed to be done and Bolton was facing a significant demographic challenge in the next few years.

The presentation was supplemented by various graphs and statistical diagrams which further demonstrated the position.

Following the presentation, members made various comments/observations:

- elected members to understand and embrace their role as corporate parents and to use their contacts within the community to engage;
- the need to understand the reasons that potential foster carers may choose the independent sector over the Local

Authority option – Mr Walker advised that finance was a factor and that the independent sector often offered more attractive allowances – he stressed the importance of working collaboratively with Greater Manchester to become stronger together;

- whether the high standards set by Bolton often made it more difficult to receive approval – Mr Walker confirmed that as a corporate parent, Bolton sought out the best carers for its children and had set high benchmarks;
- the need to retain quality foster carers - Mr Walker advised that Bolton had excellent relationships with its carers with better outcomes and that many carers had been attracted to Bolton due to the level of support they would receive – it was noted that although the Government set the fostering standards via the National Minimum Standards for Fostering, local authorities could choose to interpret these differently;
- the level of support and training provided by Bolton was excellent and many foster carers valued the close working relationship over additional finances; and
- there was a process of accountability and capped amounts for monies spent on fostering adaptations if the process did not proceed or came to an end.

Following the presentation, Ms Brown advised members that she was the lead officer for the development of collaborative working on mental health issues for children across GM which was essential if local authorities were to compete with the Independent Sector going forward. She stressed the importance of social media to spread the word and engage with potential foster carers and sought the support of elected members to help in this regard.

Resolved – That Mr Walker be thanked for his informative presentation.

11. MEMBERS BUSINESS

The Committee received the minutes of other meetings of the Council relevant to the remit of this Committee:-

F13

- None

(The meeting started at 6.00pm and finished at 7.20pm)

F14

NOTES