

## **CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

MEETING, 28<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2022

Present – Councillors Grant (Vice-Chairman), Connor, Donaghy, Finney, Hornby, McGeown, McKeon (as deputy for Councillor Iqbal), Murray, Peel, Rimmer and Taylor-Burke

### Co-opted Members

None in attendance

### Also in attendance

Councillor Galloway	-	Executive Cabinet Member – Children's Services
Ms B. Brown	-	Director of Children's Services
Mr I. Walker	-	Assistant Director – Children's Social Care and Early Help
Ms J. Gibson	-	Team Leader – Leaving Care Service
Mrs V. Ridge	-	Democratic Services Manager

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Fletcher, Hill, Iqbal (Chairman), Pattison and Sanders and from Reverend Canon Dr Bracegirdle – Church of England Diocese Representative

Councillor Grant in the Chair.

## **27. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

Resolved - The minutes of the proceedings of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held on 31<sup>st</sup> January, 2022 were submitted and signed as a correct record.

## **28. 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.

## **29. BOLTON SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP**

Ms Brown gave a presentation on the role and function of the Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership.

The Committee was advised that in 2019, revised safeguarding arrangements were introduced nationally and Bolton made the transition from the Safeguarding Board to a new partnership arrangement with Bolton CCG and Greater Manchester Police.

The three partners had a shared and equal duty to make arrangements to work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in Bolton across the following six key areas:

- set out local thresholds and multi-agency safeguarding processes;
- promote a co-ordinated and joined up approach to keeping children safe across the continuum of need, covering a range of issues;
- safeguarding arrangements that created a system where organisations, agencies and the statutory partners challenged appropriately and held one another to account effectively;
- identify and respond to new or emerging safeguarding issues, as well as tackle the 'stubborn' safeguarding challenges
- undertake effective rapid review and child safeguarding practice review processes to learn from serious child safeguarding incidents - where learning was identified, it was promoted and embedded into practice; and

- have a robust system of independent scrutiny which should be objective, act as a constructive critical friend and promote reflection to drive continuous improvement.

Comprehensive Safeguarding guidance had been issued involving:

- redevelopment and launch of partnership threshold document – Framework for Action;
- active contribution to Greater Manchester Safeguarding Procedures;
- challenge and Escalation Local Process Launching in Spring 2022; and
- Bolton Neglect Toolkit.

The presentation outlined the arrangements in place for a skilled and knowledgeable workforce:

- the partnership provided a comprehensive safeguarding children training offer;
- in the current year 35 training events were delivered to 961 practitioners;
- introduced new training methods to make best use of technology and respond to restriction of Covid; Network Bites and Knowledge Nuggets;
- evaluations of the training offer were consistently good; and
- developing the offer to strengthen knowledge on familial sexual abuse, social media and serious youth violence.

The presentation went on to outline the culture of learning and development and highlighted the following;

- 2018 – a change from Serious Case Reviews to Rapid Review and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews;
- Serious Child Safeguarding Cases – ‘a child has been seriously harmed or died and abuse or neglect is suspected or known to be a factor’;
- 2018-2022 – 13 Rapid Reviews completed in Bolton that led to 2 Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews; and

- engaged over 120 practitioners in the review process and benefited from their practice knowledge to identify learning and improvement areas.

Ms Brown advised that statutory guidance had changed in 2018 and removed Serious Case Reviews and replacing them with a new two stage review process whereby serious child safeguarding incidents were assessed via a rapid review (completed within 15 working days), before deciding whether a Child safeguarding Practice Review was needed.

The purpose of the Rapid Review was to gather the facts about the case, discuss whether there was any immediate action needed to ensure children's safety, share any learning appropriately, consider the potential for identifying improvements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and decide what steps should be taken next, including whether to undertake a child safeguarding practice review.

In response, Children's Services had adapted local processes and created a consistent model to carry out Rapid Reviews in a timely manner. Once completed Rapid Reviews would be submitted to the National Children's Safeguarding Review Panel for further scrutiny.

Feedback to Bolton from the National Panel about the quality of Bolton's reports had been positive. Examples included:

- 'Your thorough and thoughtful rapid review which did a good job of identifying a complex history of substance misuse and domestic violence'; and
- 'We thought your rapid reviews were thorough with clear actions and learning identified. We agreed with your decision not to initiate a local child safeguarding practice review'

It was noted that carrying out reviews within the timescale could be challenging due to the capacity of the BSCP team, and where more than one review was taking place at the same time.

Through the review work, several consistent themes had been identified, some of which were 'stubborn challenges'.

Ms Brown went on to advise that one of the key projects taken forward had been strengthening information sharing. Local and national reviews had identified that gaps in practitioners' knowledge in when, how and what information to share in a timely manner had led to children not being safeguarded. Practitioner worries about the Data Protection Act and GDPR had eroded confidence and created anxiety. Having worked with Information Governance leads in the Authority and CCG, the Partnership would be launching in the summer with, practical guidance and training workshops about safeguarding children and information sharing, using real examples to discuss and highlight the lawful bases under which information can be shared. This aimed to give confidence to the multi-agency workforce and ensure that at all levels of our threshold document, information was shared well to keep children safe.

In relation to scrutiny and challenge, the presentation advised that Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 required the Safeguarding Partners to set out their plans for assurance and independent scrutiny, the aim being to provide an impartial assessment of the effectiveness of multi-agency arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in a local area. The Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership Quality Assurance Framework provided an overview of the purpose, processes and tools used by the statutory partners to understand and evaluate the impact of local arrangements to keep children safe.

Whilst each individual agency had its own responsibilities to monitor and manage its own performance, it was important that this learning was shared, which would enable the statutory partners to be assured that individual organisations were discharging their duties effectively and to enable early identification of cross-cutting themes or emerging risks to children.

All services and organisations working directly or indirectly with children would be expected to contribute to partnership assurance activity where required.

While a range of methodologies had been identified to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements, one of the most powerful was the work ongoing with young people to identify and respond to their safeguarding challenges. Most recently, tabletop discussions had been held on the theme of young people feeling safe in Bolton which offered challenge to local leader and enabled work with young people to create effective solutions.

The presentation concluded with a comprehensive table of actions that the Partnership was undertaking in response to learning.

Following the presentation, members made a number of comments/observations:

- early intervention was the key;
- concern at the lack of additional funding if further needs were identified beyond the original budget;
- the role and responsibilities of partner agencies;
- concern that practitioners did not always feel confident in raising a challenge – Ms Brown assured members that these areas had been addressed in various training sessions and the procedures across all agencies made it clear on how to report concerns;
- the comprehensive training and support given by the Authority to social workers provided an incentive for them to stay with Bolton despite other authorities offering better financial gains; and
- the possibility of including young people on the Scrutiny Committee to gain their experiences.

Resolved – That Ms Brown be thanked for her informative presentation.

### **30. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS – A REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE AND OUTCOMES**

Mr I. Walker gave a presentation on Looked after Children and care leavers and provided a review of performance and outcomes.

The presentation provided details of demand management and its impact on Looked after Children (LAC) and care leavers.

Members were informed that better permanence planning had been endorsed in Ofsted focused visit. Key points included:

- 106 discharges from care in past 6 months
- 10 adopted
- 29 SGOs
- 53 returned to birth or extended family
- 8 moved to independence
- 6 other

In relation to LAC, average caseloads had reduced from 28 to 22 over the past 12 months however:

- some outliers persisted of 28-32 such as in the Leaving Care Teams;
- Bolton still had the highest caseloads in Greater Manchester where the average was 18; and
- high caseloads impacted on quality of work and social worker retention

The impact of demand management strategy on LAC numbers:

- 2018/19 = 649, 2019/20 = 630, 2020/21 = 617, 2021/22 = 535;
- no equivalent reduction in expenditure as over the past five years the average placement cost in the NW had risen by 26% (increased demand);
- 52% boys and 48% were girls; and
- Ethnic background - white – 80%, mixed heritage – 7%, Asian/Asian British – 5%, Black/Black British – 6%, other – 2%.

Less than 1% of LAC were unaccompanied children.

With regard to placement types:

- 312 foster placements (62 in IFAs);
- 70 family and friends foster placements - planned permanence;
- 43 in children's homes (32 with private providers);
- 48 placement with parents - planned discharge;
- 27 in semi-independent accommodation;
- 23 placed for adoption;
- 5 fostering for adoption placement;
- 5 in residential schools; and
- 2 in NHS (mental health)

With regard to general performance, the presentation advised that:

- despite Covid, 89% of LAC had a health check and 47% a dental check in previous 12 months (rising trend);
- despite the drive for permanence 75% of LAC have been in the same placement for 2 plus years;
- LCT supporting 297 care leavers plus approximately 45 21-25 year olds;
- 95% plus of care leavers remained in touch with their Personal Advisor (a voluntary commitment dependent on the quality of support);
- 96% of care leavers in suitable accommodation (hospital, insecure tenancies, custody);
- only 70% of 17-18 year old and 56% of 19-21 year olds are EET;
- what the role of the family firm was; and
- more work placement, apprenticeship employment opportunities.

The presentation went on to outline the following areas for development:

- recruitment of experienced social workers was a challenge;



- placement sufficiency – 62 IFAs and 32 out of area residential placements and increasingly hard to place young people due to national pressures;
- development of a Transitions Panel to improve the quality of support for those needing Adult Services interventions
- implementation of Family Group Conferencing and Life Long Links to reduce admissions, increase returns home and support better placement stability; and
- better multi-agency planning for young people being discharged from MH hospital settings.

Details of financing were provided, as follows:

- LAC unit cost (per 0-17 of the population) - Bolton = £421 and NW average = £561;
- Safeguarding unit cost - Bolton = £117 and NW average = £204; and
- Total Social Care cost - Bolton = £747 and NW average = £991.

Out of the 22 local authorities in the North West, Bolton had the fourth lowest growth in spend over the past five years at 17.5% compared to the average of 36.2% at a time of significant increased demand for service. Performance remained strong if vulnerable.

With regard to outcomes:

- children were at the forefront of both strategic planning and frontline practice - leaders and managers adapted to new working conditions quickly and maintained regular informative communication with the workforce and continued to improve practice through a variety of online and face-to-face learning - social workers report feeling supported and safe working in Bolton. (Ofsted 2021);
- one short breaks provision rated 'Outstanding' and one rated 'Good';
- two adolescent provision rated 'Good' and one rated 'Requires Improvement' but this was due to commitment to a particular young person;
- Preparation for Independence;

- Bolton Homes Project;
- Fostering Recruitment; and
- Voice4U (LAC Participation) help service improvement and design.

Ms J. Gibson attended the meeting and provided details of a Care Leaver case study.

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

- the high case load in Bolton;
- the need for additional social workers;
- the positive comments from Ofsted;
- the ongoing support given to family carers;
- the commitment of foster carers and staff to Bolton which helped with retention;
- the appointment of LAC into apprenticeship roles within the Council Departments as part of the corporate parenting responsibilities;
- the impact of Covid on LAC; and
- the ongoing care received by Bolton LAC who may have been moved out of Borough.

Resolved – That Mr Walker and Ms Gibson be thanked for their informative presentation.

### **31. MEMBERS BUSINESS**

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

- Executive Cabinet Member for Children's Services held on 7<sup>th</sup> February and 7<sup>th</sup> March, 2022.

(The meeting started at 6.00pm and finished at 7.40pm)