



Committee and Date

People Overview Committee

24 January 2024

Item

Public



Ofsted Report – Focussed visit to Shropshire Children’s Services

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1. Synopsis

This report brings to People Overview Committee the most recent letter from OFSTED which reports on a focused visit in November 2023. The letter was published on 12 January 2024. It goes on to explore next steps and what has been put in place to address the challenges.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. This report and the OFSTED letter aims to provide an updated position and relevant information relating to the recent inspection visit.
- 2.2. The report summaries the challenges that led to the findings of the Inspectors and details the formulation of an Improvement Plan to address the issues and the convening of an Improvement Board to oversee the progress.
- 2.3. The Improvement Board has the benefit of the presence of an LGA Improvement Advisor who is experienced in supporting local authorities to address issues and provides independent advice & scrutiny to the board.

- 2.4. The timeline to demonstrate improvement is initially June 2024 when we are due our next Annual Conversation.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That People's Overview Committee consider its role in ensuring that progress is made to address the issues identified in the recent inspection visit. A particular focus on the issue of recruitment and retention could be considered.
- 3.2. That People's Overview Committee support the work of the Improvement Board and seek to assure themselves of progress on a 3 monthly basis in line with the Performance Data overview.

Report

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. Failure to take clear demonstrable actions to address the issues results in a risk to children and their outcomes, children could remain at risk of harm if social workers do not have the appropriate skills and ability to undertake the complex work needed to safeguard them. The focus on recruitment, training & development aims to mitigate this risk.
- 4.2. If the issues were to go unaddressed then the Council would be at risk of a negative re-inspection. The reputational risk would be significant. The approach of a Council wide Improvement Board, which has been convened by the Chief Executive mitigates this risk.
- 4.3. Risk table

| <i>Risk</i> | <i>Mitigation</i> |
|---|---|
| Failure to address the issues identified. | Improvement Board and Improvement Plan in place and to be signed off by cabinet. |
| Failure to recruit the required staff to address the issues of capacity and experience. | Recruitment and Retention and Business Support Transformation Project in place to improve the offer to workers. Additional capacity agreed and being recruited to immediately. |

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. There is a considerable budget pressure in Childrens Services relating to the use of Agency Social Worker. We currently average about 30 agency social workers at anyone time, each one costs between 25-30% additional to a permanent social worker. This budget pressure will continue unless we can recruit permanent staff into the posts.

- 5.2. The additional staff agreed to address the capacity and caseload issues means that there is an additional pressure on Childrens Social Care budget in Q4 and into 2024/2025.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. The rural nature of Shropshire and the statutory requirement for the majority of visits to be face to face places a demand of workers across the service to travel to family homes. This places a demand on energy fuel and consumption.
- 6.2. Where we are able to use Teams for meetings to reduce the impact we do, it is not however possible in relation to statutory functions.

7. Background

- 7.1. In February 2022 Shropshire Council Childrens Social Care & Safeguarding was inspected by OFSTED under the new ILACS (Inspection of Local Authorities Childrens Services) for the first time. In that Inspection the services were Graded Good Overall, with Requires Improvement for Safeguarding Children.
- 7.2. Authorities graded Good then expect a focused visit within the first 2 years following the full inspection. This visit focuses on the authority's area of weakness.
- 7.3. In between this formal inspection the LA takes part in an Annual Conversation with OFSTED Inspectors where we present our self evaluation and discuss areas of success, progress and challenge. The purpose is to ensure that the Local Authority knows itself well. The Executive Director of People and Assistant Directors for Childrens Social Care and Education, Learning & Skills attended the Annual Conversation in June 2022 and reported on the Self Evaluation and progress made since the inspection in the February.
- 7.4. The Annual Conversation in June 2023 took place and again we reported on our self evaluation. During this meeting we told OFSTED of the challenges that were faced in Case Management Teams in relation to Child in Need, Child Protection and Pre Proceedings Work (PLO – Public Law Outline). We were clear about the challenges that were being experienced in the service and the impact. It was expected that the focused visit would be in these areas.
- 7.5. In November 2023 two Inspectors inspected the focused area of children in need, child protection and pre proceedings. They looked at a small cohort of children using the Performance Data and Quality Assurance work to inform their choice of children. Inspectors did not look at the whole service and the Judgement of Good remains, the focused visits are not graded in the framework.
- 7.6. The letter published on 12 January 2024 summarises the findings of that visit. A copy of which has been shared with Committee Members.

8. Additional Information

- 8.1. The report describes a number of challenges that the Case Management Service has faced over the previous 12 + months and the impact that it has had on service delivery and children.
- 8.2. These challenges include:
- Difficulty recruiting experienced Child Protection social workers. This is a National Challenge and one that every Local Authority is facing. Shropshire has the added challenge of its rurality and increased travel demands on workers.
 - This has meant that we have had a lot of changes in social workers in the teams in Case Management, case loads have been too high and this impacts on workers staying, also the quality and ability of agency social workers is highly variable and we have had to ask a number of social workers to leave. There are also a number of agency workers who have been with us a long time and are committed to working in Shropshire. We have converted 16 Agency Social Workers to permanent posts in the last 15 months.
 - From November 2022, due to promotion opportunities for a number of managers, there was a change in Service Manager and several Team Managers within a short period of time. All new into role. It is a complex and challenging role to learn and develop skills, coupled with each manager having a large number of children to have oversight of.
 - From January 2023 we also had to plan to exit the additional court work team that had been commissioned to support with the increase in care proceedings during the Covid pandemic.
 - The accumulative impact of these factors, especially the multiple changes in social worker for a number of children directly impacts the quality of practice and results in drift and delay. Pre-proceedings work is significantly impacted by these changes as the focused work to try and engage families in work that helps them change and make progress is interrupted for the family and making new relationships is difficult.
- 8.3. During the Inspection in 2022 Quality Assurance was a strength for the service and this continued to be until early 2023. There is a strong and effective Quality Assurance Framework in place and when it is able to be implemented effectively it has the effective oversight required. There have been 2 key roles that implement the framework vacant for a number of months and this directly impacted on the range of audit work we were able to share with Inspectors. In addition, the follow up work 'closing the loop' on actions had not been effective in recent months. Both these posts have been recruited to and commenced in post in recent weeks.
- 8.4. The inspectors did feedback on a number of strengths including the work of Stepping Stones and TREES (Together reducing & ending exploitation in Shropshire) and the impact on outcomes for children, as well as decisions are made to bring the right children into care, mostly at the right time.

- 8.5. During the Focused visit the Executive Director of People and the Chief Executive decided that an Improvement Board was required to oversee the challenges and progress and this response was fed back to Inspectors in a 'Keeping in Touch' meeting.
- 8.6. The Improvement Board has met twice. It is Chaired by the Chief Executive, has an LGA Improvement Advisor on it as well as the Executive Director for People, Director for Resources, the Portfolio Holder for Children and cross party Council members.
- 8.7. An improvement plan has been drafted and the initial draft has been shared with OFSTED. Now the letter has been published it has been shared with staff and we are collecting feedback and working with the Data and Insight Team to ensure we have the right measures in place. The final plan will be agreed at the next Improvement Board and then by Cabinet before submission to OFSTED by the deadline.
- 8.8. A number of additional social work roles have been agreed to be recruited to which aim to address the issue of high case loads. The posts focus on attracting experienced workers into our service. These roles have been advertised and are in the process of being recruited to. Some of the roles are exploring a new pilot role of Specialist Child Protection Social Worker, paid at a higher grade; the aim is to attract experienced child protection workers.
- 8.9. In addition, we are recruiting additional Child Protection Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers to address the issue of capacity and caseloads for this critical role that has an independent scrutiny function.
- 8.10. To ensure that Team Managers have the capacity to ensure that Supervision is completed in a timely way, is effective and they have capacity to have the management oversight required, we are recruiting 3 new Team Managers across the service.
- 8.11. To support Team Managers in Case Management a development programme has commenced, along with coaching and mentoring. This is being led by the Principle Social Worker and Service Managers, as well as the Assistant Director. This is a pilot and if successful will become part of the development and induction of Team Managers moving forward.
- 8.12. The progress of the Improvement Plan will be overseen by the Improvement Board on a monthly basis. The plan focuses on key areas of improvement, Quality Assurance, Management Oversight & Decision Making, Caseloads and Capacity, Recruitment & Retention, Business Support & Resources.
- 8.13. The Executive Director of People has had conversations with both the Regional Lead from the Department of Education and the LGA in relation to the actions we have taken to address the concerns.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. This was a challenging focused visit that confirmed the areas of concern and weakness that Senior Leaders were aware of. Whilst it is focused in one area of

the service at this time, it is clear that the outcome needed is that the issues and challenges do not spread wider across the service. The focus on improvement, quality assurance and using performance data to understand the child's journey will be across the service; this as a whole will be reported to Improvement Board.

- 9.2. Staff across the service have been upset by the outcome, in particular the teams directly affected. Staff told inspectors that Shropshire is a good place to work and they are aware of the actions being taken to try and address the issues they face day to day. Support is in place for workers affected.
- 9.3. The greatest challenge and potential barrier to success will be the recruitment of permanent social workers, with the relevant experience into the key posts. This is a national problem that all Local Authorities are facing. Not being able to fill these vacancies means that case loads remain too high and the quality of practice is affected. The use of agency social workers, whilst is a necessary part of the workforce, leads to vulnerability in addressing the consistency of social worker for families as they are able to move, and do, at short notice. Financially they are also a strain on the budget due to the additional costs.
- 9.4. Transforming Business Support is a project within the transformation programme and is a key part of the improvement journey. By using technology to effectively undertake key tasks, freeing Business Support Staff up to support Social Workers with key organisation functions will be a key part of our recruitment and retention strategy, as the support afforded to social workers is a key element of what they look for in the role.
- 9.5. There is work to do to address the key issues and the whole council response, through the Improvement Board is critical. Pace of progress will also be a key factor in success. It is essential that we are able to demonstrate clear progress by the time we have our Annual Conversation with the Inspectorate in June.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Local Member:

Appendices [Please list the titles of Appendices]