

BARNSELY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14TH JANUARY 2014

15. **Present:** Councillors Worton (Chair), G. Carr, Lofts, Rusby, Saunders and C. Wraith together with co-opted member Mr. J. Winter.

16. **Apologies for Absence - Parent Governor Representatives**

Apologies for absence in accordance with Regulation 7 (6) of the Parent Governor Representatives (England) Regulations 2001 were received from Ms K. Morritt and Mr W. A. Haigh.

17. **Declarations of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interest**

There were no declarations of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interest.

18. **Minutes of the meeting held on 12th November 2013**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12th November 2013 were accepted as an accurate record.

19. **Improvement Plan Progress**

The Chair welcomed the following witnesses to the meeting:

Jane Haywood MBE, Independent Chair, Barnsley Improvement Board.
 Cllr Tim Cheetham, Cabinet Member, Children, Young People and Families Directorate.
 Rachel Dickinson, Executive Director, Children, Young People and Families Directorate
 Jean Imray, Interim AED Safeguarding Health and Social Care, Children, Young People and Families Directorate

Jane Haywood gave an overview of her role and the work of the Improvement Board. The Board meets once a month. Progress against the improvement plan is reported every six months directly to Edward Timpson MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Children and Families). Jane Haywood monitors progress on the improvement plan and holds partners to account through meeting representatives from schools, the voluntary sector, health partners, social workers and other front line staff as necessary. The last report was sent to the Minister in November and further progress has been made since then.

The main points in the report were as follows:

- The Improvement Board continues to have good engagement and attendance from all partners, with strong commitment and internal challenge in evidence.
- Barnsley has strong political and executive leadership. The appointment of a new Executive Director of Children's Services has been a positive move.
- Front line staff can describe how improved supervision and audit has had a positive impact on practice.
- External partners understand the new referral system, although some work is still required on thresholds. There are concerns about the level of social care resource.
- Robust and thorough challenge from Members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee has been observed, displaying a depth of knowledge and understanding.
- The new Chair of the Barnsley Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB) has been in post for just over a year. Previous inconsistent attendance at the BSCB and inconsistent chairing of meetings has now been resolved.
- Children's social care has been restructured but everyone feels that it has gone well and has led to a clearer focus.
- There is pressure for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), with demand outstripping supply. However, this may be a national issue.
- The new IT system had a number of implementation issues which were a cause for concern, but the problems have now been resolved.
- The new audit process appears to be working effectively, with consistent audit work across social care and direct feedback to staff.
- The timeliness of Child Protection Conferences is still an issue but work is ongoing to improve consistency.

The Independent Chair reported that the overall conclusion is that Barnsley is making good progress, there is clear leadership and commitment but further work is required on thresholds and referrals. Barnsley is self-aware and is working to address these issues.

Members proceeded to ask questions as follows:

- i. What are the issues or areas of concern relating to external partners?

External partners seem to feel that social care should deal with more children. This is why more work needs to be done to gain a joint view of thresholds. There has been some improvement, as evidenced by the fact that more people get feedback when they make referrals but there needs to be common understanding and ownership of issues. In terms of the way forward, an independent threshold review is being carried out to test the thresholds by looking at the 'front door'. This will be completed by the end of January 2014. Work is needed with the Safeguarding Board and partners to ensure that people receive the right service at the right time. However, it is essential that people continue to talk and are confident in escalating concerns.

Previous concerns around the timeliness of health checks for Looked After Children have now been resolved. Members were reassured that the Child

Protection Register is checked when children attend hospital through Accident & Emergency and concerns are flagged.

- ii. A member pointed out that nationally there have been in the region of 10,000 care applications over the last year. Is this due to over-reaction? Could some applications have been avoided by partners working more closely together?

It was highlighted that there is good joint working between partners in Barnsley but this can always be improved. There has been a spike in numbers nationally because of cases reported in the media spotlight recently such as 'Baby P'. However, numbers in Barnsley remain fairly static. Barnsley is a strong community where families support each other, which is positive. A stable workforce has also helped but it is essential that people do not become complacent and continue to ask questions and raise concerns. Taking children into care is always the last option.

- iii. Do partner IT systems 'talk' to one another? When will the IT issues relating to the implementation of the new system be fully resolved?

It was explained that the national central electronic record system is no longer being developed. Current systems are unable to share data, but staff in Barnsley from partner agencies such as health, social care and the police are now co-located. It is more beneficial and efficient to have staff who talk to each other rather than systems.

Barnsley has a new IT system for children's social care, which predates the OFSTED inspection. The system was procured and went 'live' in July 2013. Performance management information for the period July to December was not produced, which was a cause for concern. A lot of work has been done with the provider to resolve this issue and performance management information can now be extracted. The system is still being refined but there is now a level of confidence in the system. Social workers have found the system helpful in terms of analysis and work planning.

- iv. How does Barnsley perform in terms of adoption?

Actual numbers are small, as are the number of placement breakdowns. More work has to be done in terms of timeliness of matching for adoption, particularly for babies who are placed in foster care and then adopted as this can be traumatic for all concerned. If children's plans for permanence are developed quickly, this leads to better outcomes from childhood. The number of placement breakdowns is small.

- v. Are children reported as missing from care Barnsley children or are they the responsibility of other authorities?

The Police, as partners in the Safeguarding Board, deal with missing children and it doesn't matter where the children are from, they have the resource to deal with them. It is also important to make a distinction between children who are genuinely missing and those whose whereabouts are known but who have to be recorded as 'missing'. More children tend to be reported missing from

residential care as opposed to foster care as these children tend to be facing the greatest challenges. The Safeguarding Board is keen to strengthen the work it does with private sector children's homes around children missing from care. 'Safe at Last' is commissioned to carry out return interviews to understand why the child went missing in the first place and to identify what can be done to help.

- vi. Are there pressures on resources in the voluntary sector?

The issue of resources is challenging across the partnership. Whilst it is acknowledged that individuals and communities value the work of the voluntary sector, with loss of grant comes the need to commission services for greatest impact. A voluntary sector consortium is being developed which contributes to planning and identifying gaps in provision but the environment is very challenging for all concerned.

- vii. What are the key issues which will need to be addressed in the next six months?

Work needs to be done on partners' understanding of thresholds and the escalation process; performance management information from the IT system needs to be used to improve services; partners must continue to work together to challenge practice and Barnsley needs to continue to be self aware and strive for continuous improvement. It is anticipated that in six months' time Barnsley should be safely out of 'inadequate'.

- viii. Do we have sufficient numbers of foster carers?

The placement strategy sets out the number of foster carers needed to meet local needs. Barnsley currently has 87 foster care families on the books but the ratio is less than the national average. This is an area of work which needs to develop. It is essential that Barnsley children are looked after by local foster carers. The number of children placed in foster care remains consistent but there is a need to increase the number of in-house foster carers by helping local people to understand the benefits of fostering for the Local Authority rather than through the independent sector. Barnsley is happy to talk to successful neighbouring authorities to learn from them. Effective marketing is essential to ensure that in-house foster carers are not lost. Research indicates that outcomes for children who are cared for in a family setting (such as foster care) are better than for those placed in residential care.

- ix. Are local children in care supported past the age of 21?

Barnsley has a 'Stay put' scheme whereby children can stay with existing foster carers if they are not ready to leave home at 18 and they choose to remain there. If children are in full time education this extends to 21+ to replicate what any good parent would do for their children.

As corporate parents, responsibility continues for care leavers. The Children in Care Council is very vocal on such matters and challenges the service to look at resources for care leavers such as 'drop-in' access when required.

x Are there any ongoing workforce issues?

Barnsley has a very stable social care workforce. However, stability is not necessarily a good thing as they need to be flexible and able to respond to a changing environment. Front line staff found the inspection difficult and felt demoralised afterwards. It is essential that staff feel valued and benefit from a supportive environment. Staff are engaged with the audit programme as it is better to involve them than have audit work 'done to them'. Effective leadership and management is important. Social workers are responsible for their own practice but managers must make sure that the working environment is supportive and that work is properly focussed. Constructive challenge at all levels is helpful, which includes Scrutiny. Councillors bring a unique perspective to the process by asking thoughtful questions and following up with further questions for clarity, which is important. Councillors will be enabled to continue to offer further challenge as performance management reporting develops and improves.

The witnesses were thanked for their attendance and contribution.

IT WAS AGREED that:

- (i) The topic for discussion at the next scrutiny meeting is likely to be performance management. Councillors look forward to receiving performance management information as required, as part of a meaningful, open and transparent working relationship.