

MEETING:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Children’s Social Care Private Briefing
DATE:	5 th May, 2020
TIME:	4.00 pm
VENUE:	Held Virtually

NOTES

Present Councillors Ennis OBE (Chair), Carr, Gollick, Hayward, Higginbottom, Hunt, Lodge, Tattersall, and Wilson together with Co-optee G. Carter.

1 Children’s Social Care Performance

The following witnesses were welcomed to the meeting:-

Mel John-Ross – Executive Director, Children’s Services
Councillor Bruff – Cabinet Spokesperson Children’s Services

A brief presentation was provided, which highlighted performance in relation to children’s social care to the end of the financial year 2019/20. It was noted that annual performance helped to demonstrate trends, avoiding any anomalies seen in monthly performance data.

The attention of Members was drawn to the numbers of Early Help Assessments completed, which had reduced from 2018/19, however it was acknowledged that there was an increase in numbers in receipt of early help support. There was an increase in numbers of referrals, and the high rates of conversion helped to show that the referrals received were appropriate.

The timeliness of assessments was seen to be outstanding overall, but improvements could be made for numbers undertaken within the 20 day timescales.

The number of Section 47 assessments had declined in quarter 4, but the numbers over the course of the year had increased when compared to that seen previously. This reflected need and demand as could be seen in the increase in number of child protection plans. Section 47 assessments proceeding to case conference within timescales far exceeded targets and was significantly improved when compared to 2018/19.

The target for children subject to a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time had been missed, but it was below benchmarks and trajectory was in the right direction.

Performance was outstanding in relation to visits and on time reviews of plans, however the decline in performance of concluding PLO cases within timescales was noted. However, it was acknowledged that this was impacted on by external factors.

Though numbers of Children in Care had slightly risen, this was against a background of national significant increases, and Barnsley’s positive performance was attributed to early help and intervention.

Performance associated with stability of placements and the length of placement was below that of 2018/19 and below statistical neighbours. Assurances were given that this was an area where significant efforts would be made to improve.

Indicators associated with health assessments and dental health remained positive and performance against personal education plan and termly education plan indicators was also positive despite being slightly under target.

School attendance remained stable, but persistent absence in primary schools was an area which required an increased focus.

Statistics in relation to care leavers in employment, training or education had improved significantly, with the exception of the 21+ age group. Performance against indicators associated with keep in touch meetings had also improved.

Members noted that there had been a reduction in caseloads in some areas which was positive, but an increase in 'front door' referrals. Numbers of Children In Need had increased, which reflected the impact of such as austerity in the borough.

Noted were the areas of future focus, which included the following:- PLO timescales, Placement Stability and Adoption Timescales.

Questions were then invited from Members and in the ensuing discussion, and challenge, the following points were raised:-

There were a number of care leavers in unsuitable accommodation; however this was not within the gift of the authority. However, assurances were given that support would be provided when the authority was able to do so.

In the current situation, 'Staying put' arrangements were promoted with clear pathways when the time was appropriate. Members heard of the 'National House Project' and discussions were taking place with Berneslai Homes in order to progress this in Barnsley. This involved support being provided for young people to renovate their homes, learning appropriate skills. Members were assured that a comprehensive package of support was provided to care leavers.

In relation to caseloads, and although these had reduced since July, it was acknowledged that they were higher than would be ideal, even in light of previous investment in this area, and the early help offer. The complexities associated with moving staff between teams was discussed, and Members noted the work to review caseloads and benchmark these, with the outcome of this to be presented to Members in due course.

Support for care leavers to access employment, education or training was discussed in some detail with Members challenging performance. Members heard how work was ongoing led by colleagues in the Place Directorate in order to develop a work based programme for care leavers who may face additional challenges. In relation to provision for those post 21, the positive support packages were noted. Members noted that there was no formal reporting for those post 21, and this was dependent on those opting to take part, however it was recognised that officers were proactive in

engaging all care leavers. Members noted that an Independent Review Officer would be reviewing the pathways offered to those over 18. In addition, it was suggested that a study be commissioned in to the experiences of those up to age 25, with the outcome of this being reported into the Corporate Parenting Panel.

The meeting discussed the numbers of Early Help Assessments closed and the differences in data between 2018/19 and 2019/20. Members were made aware of the numerous reasons for this, including that families required help for longer.

The number of young people designated as Child In Need was considered. It was noted that these do have an element of seasonal fluctuation, but that there was a real increase in numbers, which has been seen nationally as well as locally. Members heard how benchmarking takes place and that similar trends seen against comparators in quarter 3.

Questions were raised about whether staff levels were sufficient, and it was suggested that staffing levels were appropriate and that importantly relationships with partner agencies were strong. Members were assured that there was still capacity and that no agency workers had to be engaged.

In response to questions about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, Members heard how statutory services were still being delivered, but a decline in referrals to Children's Services was likely to be seen in quarter 1 due to families staying at home. A communications campaign had been undertaken to encourage anyone who had concerns to report these, and Members challenged how this could be communicated to those who may not have access to technology. The impact of the lockdown was queried, and Members were assured that planning was in place for the recovery phase with partners, and a surge in referrals was expected.

When queried whether such as the timescales of reviews would slip due to the pandemic, Members heard how reviews were still taking place and health assessments being undertaken in order to meet statutory timescales. However, there may be an impact in areas such as the recruitment of foster carers, though this was still taking place taking account of social distancing requirements.

Members questioned the numbers of children in care, and those designated as Child In Need that were attending school, and the low take up nationally was noted. The work to encourage eligible children to attend school was acknowledged.

When questioning the findings of the strengths and difficulties questionnaire, Members heard that analysis of this was still not completed and it would be considered by the Corporate Parenting Panel in due course.

RECOMMENDED that:-

- (i) Thanks be given for attending the briefing and answering questions provided by Members;
- (ii) That the outcome of the review of caseloads be presented to Members at a future meeting of the Committee;
- (iii) That the outcome of the review into the experiences of young people leaving care up to the age of 25 feeds in to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel;

- (iv) That congratulations be expressed to Mel John-Ross and best wishes be given for the start of her new role.