

Minutes of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Board

4 May 2021

-: Present :-

Councillor Bye (Chairman)

Councillors Atiya-Alla, Barnby and Mills (Vice-Chair)

Co-opted Members

Tatiana Wilson, Church of England Diocesan Representative

Non-voting Co-opted Members

Jo Morrell, Torbay Youth Trust

Charlie Hine, care experienced young person

Brent Davison, Devon and Cornwall Police

Mike Cook, Imagine This Partnership Board

(Also in attendance: Councillors Law, Brooks, Douglas-Dunbar, Loxton and Jacqueline Thomas)

1. Apologies

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the virtual meeting, particularly Mike Cook from the Imagine This Partnership Board, who had joined the Board as a non-voting co-opted member to help give their experience to the Board.

Apologies for absence was received from Councillors Mandy Darling and Steve Darling.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the meetings of the Board held on 27 January and 1 March 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3. Virtual School Annual Report 2019-2020

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Councillor Law, and the Headteacher of the Virtual School, Jane Inett, outlined the submitted annual report of the Virtual School for 2019/2020, which was the 10th annual report and the result of ten years of development from the team. Members noted that the Virtual School was exemplar and had helped to enable strong achievements from our cared for young people. The ethos of the team was to help our cared for young people achieve the most through putting in appropriate support through Personal

Educational Plans (PEPs) and ensuring that they have the correct tools e.g. during lockdown they were provided with access to additional learning websites, laptops and making weekly calls to carers to see how things were going, to ensure that they could make the most of their time out of school, with over 80% returning to school by the summer term.

Members noted that normally the Virtual School was judged by attainment at the end of the academic year, but there were no league tables for the last year and no national comparisons as the children had not sat their formal tests. This meant that based on the end of year data the position at key stage 4, GGSE, may have been improved as sometimes the scores increase following a formal maths test.

The Board was advised that the ambition was for all PEPs to be rated at 'good' to ensure that the schools really know their children and are putting in the appropriate support for them.

Members of the Board asked questions in relation to the following:

- how to ensure the PEPs are 'good' – the Headteacher of the Virtual School reads all the PEPs and advised of the processes that were in place where this was not the case such as contact was made with the school to ensure that appropriate action was taken to increase the PEP to a 'good' rating to ensure the best outcomes for the young person and the importance of a 'dedicated teacher' to support the person;
- is there SEND (Special Education Needs and Disability) screening when children come into care and how does the Virtual School ensure the physical school is aware of the needs of the child – when a child comes into the Virtual School a check is carried out to see if they have an ECHP (Education, Health and Care Plan), school action or support for the child would be identified in their first PEP. The Virtual School has a SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) who oversees all those children with an ECHP;
- there are high numbers of cared for young people within the Youth Offending Team (YOT) is the Virtual School aware of this – this information is not always known to the Virtual School, however, some of the young people may be care experienced rather than cared for, often these individuals may have speech, language and communications issues. There was currently only one cared for young person within the YOT which is in post 16. The YOT has a dedicated speech and language therapist who supports young people; and
- has the number of children attending schools out of area changed and do you record children moving schools – there were fewer children out of area which was normally 50% of the young people, out of area covered any school outside of Torbay so even neighbouring areas are classed as out of area. Details of the school moves were set out at the end of the annual report. Stability of school is really important to the young person and the Virtual School only supports moves when it is in the best interest of the young person.

There was support for the child informed approach, trying to maintain cared for young people in mainstream schools working towards positive outcomes and it

was suggested that more could be done to work with the community to see what additional support they could offer working towards better outcome for our young people.

The Board formally expressed their thanks and appreciation to the Headteacher and colleagues from the Virtual School for all their help supporting children who are in our care.

(Note: prior to consideration of the item in Minute 3 the Chairman, Councillor Bye, declared a non-pecuniary interest as a Council appointed governor of the Virtual School.)

4. Workforce Development and Sufficiency of Placements and Commissioning

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Councillor Law, outlined the submitted report on the effectiveness of the Council's approach to workforce development for Children's Services. Members noted that since the Learning Academy opened last September the vacancy rate for social workers has reduced by 10%, turnover has reduced by 11% and the use of agency staff has reduced by 23%. These improvements were as a result of investment and financial support for Children's Services last year. The Council now had in place established and clear pathways for professional development of staff, who know that they are valued and there is a proper structure for them. This includes development of an Advanced Social Worker role and structured development opportunities for first line managers.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Director of Children's Services, Nancy Meehan, responded to questions in relation to the following:

- what is the Learning Academy and where is it based – the Learning Academy is based in the Town Hall, Torquay with a training room and reflection rooms which had not been able to be properly utilised as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. This is not a social worker academy as the Council wanted a learning academy that looked wider, the head of the academy has a nursing background. Initially the focus was on newly qualified social workers, now it includes development for first line managers, advanced social workers, YOT induction process and has clear links with South Devon College, CPD (continuing professional development) modules and mentorship award. The Learning Academy was enhancing the Council's ability to retain staff going forward;
- what is the workload of clients for ASYE (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) newly qualified social workers – during the first year they start with 2 or 3 children which is gradually increased to 10 over the first year, in the second year it increases gradually up to 15 or 17 depending on their development needs. An automated report is produced each week and sent to the Director/Senior Officers to track how many children each worker is supporting;
- do they have mentors – yes they have a Practice Educators, ASYE lead, an Advanced Social Worker and Team Manager and also work in teams to ensure that they are well supported. In previous years some of the newly qualified social workers were struggling with the number of families they

were supporting and this is one of the reasons for the Learning Academy and increased capacity to support lower numbers of children in the early years;

- there has been a real turnaround in the service over the past year, where do you see the Learning Academy in five years time – to increase the capacity of the Academy and involve wider partners, support the Senior Leadership Team with relevant course, work on succession planning, leadership to ensure that we retain and develop our staff. To reduce the amount of change in the workforce and for all people to understand the child friendly approach we want for Torbay;
- what does it mean for children in our care – this will help with stability, children form a relationship with their social worker, it is disturbing for them to keep retelling their stories, we are creating the relationships between the families and the Council and the social workers are the window to families and those who are in crisis. We want to invest in our children as they deserve a trusted relationship with their social worker and for this to remain consistent; and
- we are employing one experienced agency social worker per two newly qualified social workers – this is being done in order to maintain lower cases for new social workers, if more social workers are retained there will be less need for so many newly qualified social workers and this can be reduced in time.

The Board acknowledged the positive progress made in recruiting and retaining staff and the future ambitions for the Learning Academy.

4.1 Arrangements for Fostering and Residential Care

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Councillor Law, and the Director of Children's Services, Nancy Meehan, outlined the submitted paper on the effectiveness of the arrangements for fostering and residential care, including options for meeting the needs of children and young people with complex needs who require specialist provision within Torbay. The Council's Sufficiency Strategy ensures the sufficiency of placements with foster carers and the Council and partners are continuing to look for ways to increase numbers and capacity and to make the best use of our foster carers through providing them with appropriate support and training.

Members noted that there were currently 316 cared for children, 51% are living in Torbay, 21% living in neighbouring authorities areas and 28% living out of area – some of those living out of area as this best meets their needs and established relationships.

The Board acknowledged the work with partners to try to increase the number of foster carers, such as the appointment of a dedicated Officer for Fostering Recruitment and Retention and the work with Home for Good, who work with local churches and church groups recruiting and supporting foster carers. It was important to get out and about and once restrictions allow stands will be set up at appropriate events to talk to potential new foster carers. People take a long time between thinking about becoming a foster carer to actually coming forward. There

were 95 enquiries last year and we currently have 86 foster families but still need more.

The Council was doing all it can to place children with foster families as a permanent solution as we want them to feel they will be loved within the family and achieve better outcomes, ideally within Torbay. The number of children in residential was currently 19 as a result of positive sufficiency work over the past year, this was from a highest point of 46.

The Board asked question in relation to the following:

- the report referred to introducing the Independent Placement Panel in August 2019 what happened before – previously there had been a High Cost Panel whose terms of reference included looking at the number of children in residential care and if this was the best in terms of cost and stability. We want to be restorative and the name High Cost Panel does not give the right impression, it is about what is right for the children and the value of the placement not the cost associated with the child – this is why it was replaced by the Independent Placement Panel which oversees all of our external placements;
- who is the new Fostering Recruitment and Retention Manager – Sophie Harbon-Powell;
- how long does it take from an enquiry to becoming a foster carer – there is a two stage process (stage 1 is two months and stage 2 is four months) these stages can run concurrently and it could take up to 16 weeks (four months); and
- the Council awarded Freedom of the Borough of Torbay to two of our foster carers in recognition of the large numbers of children they had supported, did the publicity around this lead to an increase in enquires – there were more enquiries last year compared to others – a written response will be circulated to the Board around the numbers following the publicity of the Freedom of the Borough of Torbay on 26 February 2021.

Members felt that the reports under minutes 4 and 4.1 had been very informative and were satisfied by the responses provided to their questions that appropriate action and progress was being made in respect of workforce development and sufficiency of placements and commissioning at this time.

5. Children's Improvement Plan Quarterly Update

Members noted that due to staff sickness it had not been possible to circulate a report for this item, however, the Director of Children's Services, Nancy Meehan, provided a verbal update. The Improvement Programme aimed to bring Children's Services to a 'good' standard by April 2021. The Plan was based on previous Ofsted recommendations and covered the following four themes:

1. Leadership, management and governance

This involved making sure the right leadership and culture is in place to improve outcomes, management grip around delivery of services, ensuring completed data, performance and intelligence – are we doing better and are

statutory responses improving e.g. when people are referred to services, speed of proceedings etc – these were all seeing improvements. Professional responses to where there may be concerns of allegations of safeguarding issues of people who are in positions of trust were improving and meeting all timescales and there had been a significantly improved response to children at risk of exploitation e.g. through MACE, CMOG meetings in response to child exploitation screening tools and improvement partnership working.

2. A robust model of social work practice

This was covered earlier in the meeting plus community based early help services being rolled out across Torbay to ensure a community and voluntary sector response. This would help deliver services to families in their communities to help reduce the need for formal statutory responses.

3. A sufficient and skilled workforce

This was also covered earlier in the meeting. Staff turnover is currently 9.9% which is below the national and regional statistical neighbours.

4. Quality assurance and audit

Children's Services are quality assuring their work and holding up a mirror to see if their actions make a difference to our families. Ofsted had acknowledged that the Council was in a very different place as demonstrated by the move away from a DFE appointed Commissioner to an Improvement Partner. There has been improvements in recording and showing outcomes for children but there is still a long way to go. The vision is that children deserve outstanding services at all times.

Members asked questions in relation to the following:

- the Plan was to be rated as 'good' by April 2021, the Improvement Board acknowledged that we were probably not yet there, what more do we need to do to get to 'good' and what are the areas of weakness – Ofsted are not seeing any signs of children being unsafe which is positive, but there is still variability and lack of consistency for all our children across all our teams. They are focussing on supporting first line managers to bring in consistency across all teams, children should get the same and right and good service across all teams. They need to be more reflective in supervision, what does it mean for the children when making decisions in the context of the child's journey and life? The challenge has been trying to deliver improvements in Covid-19 not having the same access to 1 to 1 reflections or debriefs after a difficult situation, learning and development working within a team has not been there as they are working differently;
- progress of Liquid Logic – this is on track to be implemented on 7 June 2021 and will enable improvement of reporting through streamlining of systems. During that week there will be a lockdown of the two systems, the challenge is to ensure that data is input into the two systems to migrate the data across, the challenge is to ensure that data is input into the two

- systems and there are plans and people in place to carry this out and ensure that there is no data blackout during that time; and
- does anyone from the voluntary and community sector sit on the Improvement Board – not at present but the membership is being reviewed to see who the partners are to take us on the next stage of our journey and how the voluntary sector can be involved. It was important to ensure representation and the voice of young people was taking into account – Nancy Meehan agreed to take this suggestion back to the Chair of the Improvement Board.

6. Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Board Action Tracker

The Board noted the submitted action tracker. The Clerk advised that:

- three expressions of interest had been received from parent governors and that we were allowing time for others to put forward their interest before determining if an election needs to be held, if there is more than one person from each category;
- that the Our Promise to You – The Torbay Pledge to cared for and care experienced children/young people 2021-2022 had been adopted and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services had agreed to provide regular updates every six months; and
- the Cabinet's response to the recommendations of the Youth Offending Team was circulated with the tracker.

Members raised the following points:

- disappointment that an action plan had not been agreed for the Our Promise to You – The Torbay Pledge – Councillor Law explained that the Pledge was what we intended to do each and every day on a regular basis and Jo Morrell confirmed that the Pledge related to the key messages that our young people wanted and needed to be lived in every day and that the young people will hold people to account. They are building in feedback through the Corporate Parenting Board and looking at how the young people who are part of the Circle are going to have more say over the agendas of the Corporate Parenting Board to ensure there is accountability. A response will be included in the new Corporate Parenting Strategy to ensure there is a mechanism built in so that young people can hold us to account for delivery of the Pledge. Members were assured by this response that appropriate action was being taken; and
- Lack of Youth Workers and one of the YOT recommendations related to the YOT budget – Councillor Law explained that as this was a shared budget part of it could not be increased without the other partners increasing their contribution. This was partly being picked up as part of the Early Help Strategy as it is important for the community to bring in their support.