

Minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 4 January 2024

Present: Bob Spencer (Chair)

Attendance	
Johnny McMahon	Paul Snape (Vice-Chair (Scrutiny))
Gillian Pardesi	Mike Wilcox
Kath Perry, MBE	Conor Wileman

Also in attendance: Paul Northcott, Jeremy Pert and Mark Sutton

Apologies: Gill Burnett-Faulkner, Janet Eagland and Ann Edgeller

Part One

6. Declarations of Interest

There were none at this meeting.

7. Minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2023

Members congratulated Staffordshire's Trading Standards Team for the excellent work evidenced in the National News recently around seizing illegal vapes.

Resolved: That the minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 23 November 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

8. Homes for Children in Our Care

The Scrutiny Committee considered proposed changes to provision of homes for children in the County Council's care. These proposals were due to be considered by Cabinet at their meeting of 17 January 2024.

Members received a presentation outlining: the vision; national, regional and local context; the residential care framework; the range of options considered; and the financial impact of proposals, including capital costs, estimated running costs and operational costs.

To help compliment the current homes and provide smaller homes for children & young people (C&YP) who have more complex needs the Scrutiny Committee heard proposals to open six in-house local authority run children's homes. The aim was to help maintain some control over the

market by enabling the County Council to take C&YP that the private sector were reluctant to take without a significant increase in their fees. This proposal would require a contribution of £0.3m in 24/25 from the Council's transformation fund to meet upfront costs incurred during the transition process.

There was also a proposal to join the West Midlands Framework for the Provision of Residential Placements 2024. The current flexible framework contract was due to expire in December 2024. The plan would be to implement a new framework earlier, by October 2024, aiming to encourage more providers to join and therefore enabling a wider choice, broader specialisms and achieve better value for money. This contract was currently led by Coventry on behalf of the West Midlands region.

The final proposed change was to join the West Midlands Foster Care Framework 2024. This framework would replace the existing framework which had been in place since April 2020 and was due to expire in March 2024. The current framework had been successful in maintaining costs and had helped access to a wide market. The current contract could be extended by 3 months given that timescales were tight.

Members discussed the proposals in detail, particularly the concept of disrupting the care home market and the rationale and expected impact of that. The Committee had particular concerns around the required 85% occupancy of the six proposed new homes to ensure they were financially viable. Whilst this remained a risk that would need monitoring, it was seen as a risk worth taking to ensure the needs of children were met and to help address the continued price growth from the private sector.

Members were made aware of the requirement to match children within a home, with smaller homes enabling this process to be more easily achieved. It also enabled more complex needs of children to be catered for and provided more local places, enabling continuity for children in their schooling, with their friends etc. Members also considered issues around staffing the potential new homes.

The Committee supported the proposals, whilst having some reservations around maintaining the 85% occupancy and successfully staffing the proposed new children's homes.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee supports the recommendations for Staffordshire County Council to:

- a) open six in-house local authority run children's homes;
- b) request a Contribution of £0.3m in 24/25 from the Council's transformation fund to meet upfront costs incurred during the transition process;
- c) join the West Midlands Framework for the Provision of Residential

Placements – from October 2024; and
d) join the West Midlands Foster Care Framework from April 2024.

9. Family Help Model

The Scrutiny Committee considered a presentation and report on the Family Help Model Pilot, including the rationale for its implementation, the engagement undertaken with staff to date and the pilot's next steps. The pilot had been approved by the Children and Families Senior Leadership Team in October 2023 and formed part of the change and transformation activity that was happening within Children and Families.

Family Help was an approach suggested by the government in their consultation proposal "Stable Homes, Built on Love", a response to "The Independent Review of Children's Social Care". The pilot had been formed in line with the government's vision for "a non-stigmatising, welcoming family help service based in local communities". The intention was to use a skilled, multi-disciplinary workforce so that the needs of children and families could be met in one place. The government had introduced a 'Twelve Families First for Children Pathfinder' initiative. Local authorities had been identified to test the operationalisation of the family help vision, being supported by £45 million of investment. The first wave of pathfinding authorities were identified in July 23: Lincolnshire, Wolverhampton, and Dorset. Staffordshire had been unable to bid to be a pathfinder in wave 2 due to being part of Family Network Pilot. However the County Council was aspirational for their children, supporting the current government proposals which were based upon the same principles Staffordshire adhered to:

- a. prioritising relationships at the heart of the care system;
- b. reducing the need for crisis response and providing more early support to families including local early help and intervention with issues such as addiction, domestic abuse, and mental health to keep families together;
- c. using family networks at an early stage to support parents and minimise risks to children by using family group decision-making, such as family group conferences. Staffordshire has pathfinder status (Wave 2) for the Family Network Pilot which compliments this model.

It was intended to trial the Family Help Model in two districts, Stafford and Lichfield. The Committee considered the governance, implementation time plan, operating model and the risks and opportunities of the pilot. It was intended to be launched mid March 2024, with an evaluation during October/November of that year, with consideration to roll this out across

the County from December.

Members sought clarification between the Family Help Model and the Family Hub. The Family Hub had replaced the supporting families model and provided timely support for children and families, working within early help and at Tiers 1 and 2. The Family Help Model was a way to better support flow and demand, working within the Tier 4 referrals to social care. This looked at managing staff in a different and more effective way, stabilising the system and managing case loads better, focusing on Children in Need (CIN) to help avoid escalation.

Members queried whether there were issues with recruitment and the rate of agency social workers currently used by Staffordshire. There was currently a 7% rate, however two years ago the rate of agency social workers had been 21%, so it was an improving picture.

The Committee also discussed in detail the proposed change of practitioner emphasis. This was a more creative way of working with CIN, with this work not always being undertaken by a social worker, although still being overseen by a social worker and remaining a statutory responsibility.

Resolved: That the Family Help Model pilot trialled in Lichfield and Stafford be supported.

10. Staffordshire Safeguarding Children's Board (SSCB) Annual Report 2022-2023

[Ian Vinall, Independent Chairman and Scrutineer of the Staffordshire Safeguarding Children's Board]

The SSCB are required to report annually on the progress made by the 3 statutory safeguarding partners to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to enable robust Member scrutiny of its statutory functions. SSCB Annual Reports provide a transparent, public account of the work of the partnership during 2022-2023.

Since the last Annual report was considered by the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee the SSCB had continued to make steady progress on a wide range of objectives through effective local partnership working, despite the legacy challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic climate, and agency restructures. This included engaging in activity which was targeted at groups of children and young people who had been identified as being vulnerable due to criminal exploitation, and neglect. The information provided in the annual report highlighted some of the most noticeable achievements in respect of the priority areas and work undertaken with partner agencies.

The Committee heard from the Independent Chair and Scrutineer, Mr Ian Vinall, hearing his reflections on the work of the Board. These included the new arrangements with the Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub following separation of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent to form two separate Hubs, as well as the learning from child safeguarding practice reviews. He commended the front-line workers he'd met for showing true passion and commitment to their role. He also felt some very strong relationships had been formed with schools, working well together during the last year with headteachers and designated safeguarding leads.

Whilst the Scrutiny Committee felt the Annual Report evidenced some real highlights, they had concerns over elements within the report, including reference to:

- "lack of commitment and buy-in from senior managers in understanding the benefits of using Graded Care Profile";
- the 20% increase during this period in children discussed at the Multi-Agency Child Exploitation Panels (MACE);
- the 6% increase in domestic abuse crimes and incidents;
- poor attendance at SSCB training events from partner organisations, with 7% from Staffordshire County Council, 5% NHS and 2% Staffordshire Police/Fire & Rescue attendance.

In light of these concerns the Committee asked whether Staffordshire had effective safeguarding practices. Mr Vinall felt there was still work to do but that the SSCB had brought openness and honesty into the system through this report. He gave assurances that front line staff were committed to their role and that they knew the children they worked with well. However, challenges existed within the partnership and how well it worked together. The new MASH arrangements would help with this, as would learning from Reviews. He acknowledged that finance was a challenge and he felt there was a need to agree a budget that put children and young people as the priority. He also felt the statutory leadership of the partnership needed to be focused on the Board's priorities.

The Scrutiny Committee shared their frustrations that the report evidenced a need for better partnership working, information sharing and communication. They were informed that the information sharing agreement between partners was being refreshed again which should help with communication moving forward. Child exploitation was a key area of focus for the Partnership and there was a need for the data provided to be multi-agency, clear and more focused on the experience of children and young people.

Some frustration was also shared at the level of delegation of those attending the Board and/or SSCB Scrutiny and Assurance Group, being at a level where strategically decisions wouldn't be made. Members

requested data on attendance at Board meetings, specifically how often the three chief executives of the statutory partner organisations attended in the last 12 months. They also requested data on whether meetings were held virtually or in person. They were informed that Chief Executives did not attend Board meetings but delegated this responsibility, with the SSCB statutory members being the Director for Children and Families for Staffordshire County Council, the Chief Nursing and Therapies Officer for the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care Board and the Assistant Chief Constable for Staffordshire Police.

The Committee was grateful for the honesty and frankness of the report. They felt that having an independent scrutineer as chairman was hugely beneficial. Members also felt there was a need to seek the attendance of Chief Executives to this scrutiny committee, asking them to account for the issues outlined within the report, specifically the poor communication and information sharing.

Members raised concerns around on-line abuse and were informed that child exploitation was the focus for the learning hub, and on-line abuse would be included as part of this work.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee remain concerned over elements highlighted within this report, particularly around communication, information sharing and delegation. They intend to pursue some form of engagement with Chief Officers from partner organisations to share these concerns and seek reassurance.

Resolved: That:

- a) the work of the Staffordshire Safeguarding Children's Board be noted and that their concerns around communication, information sharing and delegation be taken back to the Board;
- b) engagement with Chief Officers takes place to highlight concerns around communication and seek assurances for work taken to ameliorate these issues.

11. Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Adult Safeguarding Partnership Board (SSASPB) Annual Report 2022/2023

[John Wood, Independent Chairman of the SSASPB & Helen Jones, Adult Safeguarding Partnership Board Manager, and Ruth Martin, Principal Social Worker and Safeguarding Lead, in attendance for this item]

The Annual Report of the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Adult Safeguarding Partnership Board (SSASPB) covered the period 1st April 2020 to March 31st, 2021. The report provided an overview of the work of the Board and its sub-groups and illustrated, with case studies, how the

focus on Making Safeguarding Personal was making a positive difference to ensuring that adults with care and support needs were supported to make choices in how they live their lives in a place where they feel safe, secure and free from abuse.

This was the first year the SSASPB reported on the priorities within its revised strategic plan. The Independent Chairman, Mr John Wood, informed Members that the SSASPB was in a mature position, with good engagement across a strong partnership.

There had been a drive to raise awareness and encourage reporting of safeguarding concerns. The number of safeguarding concerns had increased but this was seen as a positive reflection of the work to encourage reporting.

The Committee discussed in detail the issue of neglect, referencing the "Andrew" Adult Safeguarding Review (SAR). As a direct response to this SAR the Partnership Board had developed training around the issue of self-neglect, the response and engagement to this being very positive. This had included the impact of grief and loss on an individual. It was noted that during the last 18 months of Andrew's life he was visited on 307 occasions by 11 service providers, highlighting again the importance of information sharing and effective communication. There was also an understanding that these issues took time to address and there was a need for senior leaders to enable this time to be available for front line staff.

Members noted a greater level of concerns reported for female than male individuals, with 63% of Section 42 enquiries being in relation to females. Further investigation had been undertaken around this. National figures showed that women were more likely to suffer abuse than men, and this was not a simple under-reporting of male concerns. Females were more likely to live longer and therefore proportionally more likely to be in residential care homes. However further work was being undertaken to look at comparisons with Staffordshire's population, including ethnicity, and the number of Section 42 referrals, to establish whether there was underreporting from specific groups within our population.

The Committee were informed that a pilot was being introduced to seek feedback from adults with lived experience, as this was currently the missing piece of evidence in evaluating practice. Learning from this feedback would help focus learning and development training. Details were shared with the Committee of safeguarding learning events, including practitioner focused events, many of which offered an opportunity to discuss approaches to case examples from a multi-disciplinary perspective.

Members queried the percentage of Section 42 referrals where no action was taken. In many cases this would be because the referral should not have been made under Section 42. An explanation of this detail would be included in the next annual report. Members also discussed what constituted a Section 42 referral, noting that this was in relation to an adult who was unable to protect themselves from abuse or neglect. In these instances, there was a duty to make enquiries, however the individual had the right to refuse any support offered. Work was ongoing to provide training and on-line tools to support colleagues in understanding when Section 42 referrals were appropriate. An on-line referral form was also being developed which would further help direct appropriate referrals.

The Committee thanked the Independent Chairman, Mr John Wood, for his 8 years as chairman, understanding that this was his last year and congratulating him on his service and dedication to the work of the SSASPB.

Resolved: That the Annual Report 2022/23 of the SSASPB be welcomed and Mr John Wood, Independent Chairman be thanked for his 8 years' service as SSASPB Chairman.

12. Work Programme

The Committee had previously requested an item on the outcome of the Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services be included on their agenda for 15 February. The report was due to be published on 12 January. A request had been received to move this item back to enable an appropriate report and response to be produced. It was noted that the Committee do not have a meeting scheduled for March. Rather than adding an extra meeting Members agreed to schedule the report to come to their April meeting.

Resolved: That the item on the outcome of the Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services be put back from February to the April meeting.

Chair