

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)

12th February 2015

SECTION B – MATTER FOR INFORMATION

WARDS AFFECTED: All

Report from the Children’s Services Improvement Member Panel on recent visits to Social Work Teams

Purpose of Report

To provide the Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee with feedback from the Member Improvement Panel recent visits to Social Work Teams.

Background

The Children’s Services Improvement Member Panel was set up in November 2012 to provide the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet with additional assurance that rapid and sustainable improvement was being made to the Council’s arrangements to safeguard children and young people and to support looked after children. Part of their remit is to highlight specific areas that required improvement.

The Panel has met with Children’s Services Social Work Teams on several occasions to discuss the changes that have happened and to help identify any issues that need to be addressed. The Committee previously received a report from the Panel in March 2014 following focus groups that they held with a cross section of staff from the teams. Members found this evidence useful in complementing the other workforce development information received by the Committee.

The Panel undertook its third set of visits with teams during the period of 27th October 2014 to 18th December 2014. The meetings with the teams provided Members with an insight of what progress has been made and to gather social workers views on how the Service is progressing. It also identified areas of

concern to be addressed. The notes of the meetings were shared with the Head of Children and Young People Services and the relevant Principal Officers to feed into service improvements. This report provides Members with a summary of this information.

During the visits there were some topics raised which have been outlined below under cross cutting themes.

Morale and Stability of Teams

The Panel noted that the moral of all teams was high and there was a marked difference compared with previous visits to the teams. Every team visited felt that members of their team were supportive of each other. Social Workers felt that the reputation of Neath Port Talbot Children and Young People Services had improved it was a more positive and safer place to work. Several examples of this were highlighted, such as some agency workers had become permanent members of staff, a member of staff that had left the Authority had returned, social workers had joined Neath Port Talbot from other Local Authorities and a deputy team manager had stated that 2 years ago they would have not considered doing the job. All commented that the Service had moved forward and the majority of staff felt valued and supported. The commitment of staff was evident. No references were made to bullying or oppressive practice by any teams.

All teams felt that the Senior Management Team was approachable and they had positive comments about the Head of Service and Director of Social Services, Health and Housing. Particular mention should also be made to the comments regarding the excellent job that the business support staff were doing within the teams.

Teams that had recently moved into Neath Civic Centre gave a balanced view on what worked well being based there and what did not. Overall, teams were happy with being based in the Civic Centre and felt less isolated and more supported. It was felt that it is easier to liaise with each other and created better working relationships.

The two Community Teams that are not based in the Civic Centre (Dyffryn and Sandfields) clearly stated that they wanted to remain based within the community. The Dyffryn Team were happy with where they are based and the Sandfields Team were very positive about their impending move to new accommodation.

At the time of the visit Route 16 were based in Pontardawe and there had been some discussions about accommodation, however, since the visit this team has moved into Neath Civic Centre and so the comments and issues raised have not been included within the report. A better base was also being looked at for the Emergency Duty Team, to ensure safer working arrangements for the team.

The majority of teams seemed to be stable and it was apparent that there are actions in place to provide additional support to teams that require it. It was noted that inconsistency in teams had an impact on performance. Building trust and relationships with families, children and young people was a very important part of the work of the Service and this was also reliant on consistency of Social Workers and Practice Support Workers (PSWs) that are involved with families.

Improvements

Particular improvements that were highlighted by teams, included the following:

- The Service was felt to be less reactive and more proactive in preventing children coming into care.
- The IT System praised as being much easier to use, however, there was still some confusion over whether spell check had been set up on the system.
- Some teams were seeing more family members willing to take in children to prevent them going into care. There had also been a drive to increase Special Guardianship Orders to prevent children becoming looked after.
- The reputation of the Service has improved externally.
- Good quality training including multiagency training.
- Most teams reported good relationship with partners. The need to work well with other agencies and schools to ensure referrals are made where necessary and to inform assessments was emphasised.

Performance Information

Several teams referred to performance indicators and the commitment to meet targets. Concern was raised over the way dips in performance of some teams was reported to Members and if they were provided with background reasons. The Panel took the time to assure teams that the context to performance information was provided to Members of the Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee and where there had been unexpected circumstances it was fully explained. In addition what action had been taken to address dips in performance was also explained to Members. Teams seemed to be reassured by this explanation and were pleased that Members were receiving the full picture on the performance of the Service.

All teams reported no significant problems with sickness absence and the Panel were pleased to hear this. There were also less agency staff and it was highlighted that there was a better calibre of agency staff where they were required.

Supervisions, Appraisal System, Training and Newly Qualified Staff

The Panel asked all teams about supervisions and all teams indicated that they were receiving regular supervisions. It was highlighted that there had been some issues with consistency in who undertook supervisions for some teams, however, actions had been put in place to address this. Space and privacy for supervisions is an issue for some teams. Individual issues were raised in regards to supervisions and these had been reported to the Head of Service to investigate. It was evident that there is a lot of indirect supervision, in addition to formal supervisions. It was highlighted that team discussions were useful for team members to learn from each other. The Panel asked the teams about the introduction of an appraisal system and all indicated that they would welcome this approach.

The Panel was informed that there is more emphasis on nurture your own and more social workers going “through the bar”. Some concerns were raised by those that were starting their second year in practice over workload balanced with academic work and having support to do it.

Other practices that were felt to be helpful included Social Work Panels as they are structured and effective. The Practice Improvement Group was also seen as a good way for teams to feed into improvement process.

All teams felt they had received good training. The resilience and vulnerability tool was particularly mentioned in being helpful in making difficult decisions and managing risk. Some teams had received training that had been specifically tailored to their needs and there had been very positive feedback on this. Student social workers reported that they were happy with the support they received and the experience they had gained. Consultant social workers are looking at developing consultancy and mentoring roles.

Workload and Quality

All teams seemed to be focussed on improving the quality of work. It was also highlighted that the quality assurance work was being strengthened. There is more emphasis on ensuring that care plans meet the needs of the child. It was recognised that the voice of the child needs to be heard and they should have easy access to their social worker. Previously the focus had been on frontline teams but now the Service was looking at other aspects.

Concerns that were raised included a shortage of good quality locations for contact visits. Some teams suggested that a similar centre to Pendarvis would be useful in the Neath or Pontardawe areas of the County Borough. It was also highlighted that a lot of venues were not suitable due to health and safety aspects and size. There are also cost implications for using other venues, which had to be paid for even if the visits were cancelled at short notice. In addition it was highlighted that there are a shortage of contact workers and PSWs often had to cover contact visits, which takes them away from undertaking more quality work with children.

Caseloads varied from team to team and it was emphasised that the complexity of cases had an impact on how manageable they are. It was highlighted that some teams have more varied work than others as there is currently more demand in some teams than others (e.g. LAC Team).

The increased demands from court work was highlighted by a lot of teams as adding pressure, especially as this work takes priority. The changes in timescales had added to this. Courts are more reluctant to put care orders in place and sometimes place unrealistic demands on social workers. New adoption legislation has also increased the workload for some teams. It was noted that there were still a lot of unclaimed hours worked by social workers and PSWs.

Several teams highlighted that they would like to spend more time on quality work with children. For example, there is a backlog of lifestory work as social workers and PSW have to prioritise other work areas. It was also noted that there have been some mixed messages over what should be included in lifestory work, as the information should be age appropriate but accurate.

Care Leavers

Some of the issues raised were specifically in regards to care leavers. It was highlighted that there has been an improvement in accommodation for care leavers. However, there is still a lack of supported accommodation and in finding emergency placements in support lodgings. It was recognised that the commissioning arrangements for this service are being revised and should help to resolve such issues. The relationship between Children's Services and Housing Options has been improved, however, there are still some concerns over intentionality. It was noted that this could partly be down to the way that the young person is being presented to Housing Services. Further work is required in this area between the two services.

The implications of the bedroom tax were raised and it was highlighted that it is a complex issue. Care leavers are not exempt from it; therefore, if a care leaver is in Social Housing then it can have an impact on their financial situation, as there is a lack of one bedroom accommodation. However, if a care leaver is in a privately rented accommodation then it will not have an impact. It was queried if the Council had any discretionary powers to ensure care leavers would be exempt from bedroom tax or if there would be any possibility for the Council to make a contribution towards it.

It was noted that there has been a reduction to the Education Participation Funding which has had an impact on care leavers. Also it has changed from being paid weekly to termly have made it more difficult for some to manage their money.

Concern was raised about a shop selling legal highs in the Neath area and it was asked what powers the Council had in preventing this. The Panel had raised this issue with Trading Standards, who were already aware of it and were looking at what steps could be taken. The Panel had asked to be kept up to date with any progress.

Attainment of Looked After Children

It was noted that there are some inconsistencies across schools in liaising with social workers and in understanding the needs of Looked After Children (LAC). It was suggested that further training for teachers in this area would be helpful.

Speech and language therapy was also highlighted as a significant tool for LAC.

Foster Care

There was a lot of discussion around foster care. It was highlighted that there is sometimes a lack of in house foster care placements particularly for certain groups, such as teenagers and children with disabilities. Further recruitment of in house foster carers should be encouraged. It was noted that the Council has a low rate of losing foster carers once they are with Neath Port Talbot. It was noted that Independent Fostering Agencies can offer more support but the costs of this support is paid for by the Local Authority through the fees they charge.

Some Local Authorities pay foster carers a retainer, which is beneficial to carers and could assist with recruiting more. However, it was recognised that it could be expensive to have a lot of retainers if placements are not being used. It was also noted that the Fostering Team actively tries to recruit foster carers within Neath Port Talbot boundaries to try and provide LAC with more stability.

It was highlighted that the most difficult group to find a placement for was teenagers and it would help to have more foster care plus in house. It was

suggested that a specialist group of foster carers for this age range could help with finding placements. It was also suggested that foster carers could receive further training in such areas as attachment, which would assist them in dealing with the behaviour of some children.

The majority of teams noted that there are more children with complex needs including behavioural and emotional problems. Some Local Authorities have child psychologists that foster carers can access and it was suggested that this would be useful for Neath Port Talbot foster carers. Another suggestion was to have a behavioural specialist to help foster carers deal with challenging behaviour.

The other group that is difficult to place is children with disabilities. Often specialist skills, such as medical training, are required and there is one independent agency that specialises in this area. More children on the Autistic Spectrum Disorder Spectrum could be placed with in house foster carers if they had the right support.

Stability for LAC was raised as a key issue and it was recognised that the new Placement Strategy will have a positive impact in this area, as it will provide more direction and focus. The changes to adoption services will result in more flexible working and hopefully provide more adopters.

Additional Resources

As part of the visits the Panel asked teams what would assist them in carrying out their work. Most teams were aware of the budget pressures and some teams asked for what they had to be protected rather than additional resources.

A lot of teams highlighted that it would be useful to have another behavioural specialist within Children's Services, especially as teams are seeing more children and young people with more complex needs. Targeting support at an early point will also help to prevent some cases reaching crisis point. Alternatively it was suggested that access to a child psychologist would assist teams, parents and foster carers in addressing behavioural problems.

One team had requested passes to be able to park in residential areas during work hours to provide easier access. Teams that work in valley areas had asked if there was any possibility of having access to 4x4 vehicles during inclement weather. They had also enquired if the Council put on any training for employees for driving in ice and snow.

It was noted that diaries were no longer provided to employees and there was useful contact information in them. The Panel reinforced that not providing diaries was a corporate decision and applied across the board. On investigation it was apparent that the contact information was available in other forms such as online.

Some teams requested Blackberries rather than mobiles for PSWs, other teams asked for more up to date mobile phones as it can be hard to get a signal in some areas. Also some non-frontline teams would like Blackberries as situations can change quickly and they could react more promptly if they had the information earlier on.

A lot of teams requested more PSWs, especially as some are doing the Social Work degree which takes time out of their jobs. Some teams also requested more business administration staff.

One suggestion to help progress the service was for more work to be carried out on developing disability practice.

Support Services

Most teams mentioned that there was a decrease in the amount of support services available and concern was raised about reducing funding to some support services and what would be put in place.

It was highlighted across the board, including for Looked After Children, there was a sporadic Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAHMS) and there was a need for improvements in this service. It was highlighted that there is limited support for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Lack of parenting classes was also raised as an issue and a need for counselling services was identified.

It was noted that courts are requesting more therapeutic input for Looked After Children. There is a lack of this type of service in Neath Port Talbot and it is expensive. It was also noted that quicker decisions are sometimes required from senior management on such services when they are asked for by the court.

Some teams would like additional information on Think Families Partnership and their work. They would also like clearer links with Team Around the Family.

General Issues

Some working environment issues were raised. All teams based in Neath Civic Centre raised safety concerns regarding parking in the multi-storey car park, whilst the new car park is being built. It was recognised that this is an issue for all employees in the Neath Civic Centre and not just Social Services staff. The heating control in Neath Civic Centre was raised as an issue as it can be too cold or too hot and can be uncomfortable.

Some teams noted that there were problems associated with substance misuse and domestic violence, especially during holiday periods, which had an impact on demand. One team highlighted that poverty was a significant influencing factor.

It was noted that early intervention and prevention work is being prioritised and it was also felt that it is important to have the right support for the children already in the system.

Across the board raising the profile of the work of the teams was highlighted, especially in recognising the good work that is being undertaken. Some teams would like to make more use of social media.

It was felt there were fewer complaints with the new system in place and the Director of Social Services, Health and Housing signing off all stage 2 complaints.

One team mentioned that they would like more feedback at times on whether suggestions were acted upon by senior management.

Some teams had extra suggestions to make improvements and to add value. For example, the Sandfields Team are looking at developing a drop in for children and young people to break down barriers and take the fear out of social services. The Panel were pleased to hear about such ideas.

Corporate Parenting Panel

Some of the topics highlighted in this report are relevant to the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel as they relate to Looked After Children and Care Leavers. The Improvement Panel have also produced a report for the Corporate Parenting Panel to draw out the topics that are relevant to their work. This information could potentially assist the Panel with their work and highlights points to be considered in taking forward work and in monitoring the impact.

Summary

Each round of visits by the Panel has found that morale has improved and there has been a big improvement in staff satisfaction. During these recent visits the Panel were particularly pleased to note that the discussions had progressed to quality of work and suggestions for improving the Service. This is a significant step forward as all teams seemed more positive and there was more stability. This information complements other evidence on workforce performance information and staff feedback.

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