

Children's Commissioner findings and recommendations

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The task

1. Support the Council in developing a strong improvement partnership and the necessary governance.
2. Review and provide assurance to the Department on current service arrangements, including leadership, governance and quality assurance.
3. Provide monitoring and practice advice to the children's services senior team to ensure a robust response to Covid-19.
4. Help the Council to use learning from the new ways of working implemented during Covid-19 to inform improvement work.
5. Bring together evidence to assess the Council's contingency planning including, but not limited to, staffing arrangements, finance, case prioritisation and tracking of vulnerable children.
6. Issue any necessary instructions to the Council for the purpose of securing the immediate safeguarding of children identified as at significant risk during the Covid-19 outbreak.
7. Advise on relevant contingency planning and any alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care during this time, taking account of local pressures and the views of the council and key partners.

The process and the areas covered

- Context and outcome of the Ofsted inspection
- Reviews and inspections prior to 2020
- The Council's self evaluation
- Action following the inspection
- How children's services are organised
- Partnership arrangements and responding to Covid-19
- Performance, Quality assurance and Reviews
- Workforce and the views of staff
- Scrutiny, challenge and participation of children and young people



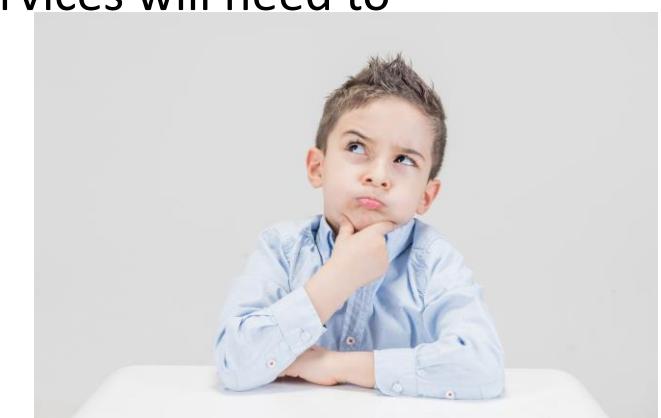
What staff told me

- ‘Covid galvanised the partnership to focus on more help, less assessment’
- ‘have had to adjust to Covid issues, such as not getting PPE to begin with, alongside that increased demand on performance, hard to do at the same time’
- ‘taken on long term neglect cases, in proceedings now but criticised for delay’
- ‘Council talking about recruitment and retention forever’
- ‘Morale was quite high coming up to Ofsted. inadequate a blow to a lot of people, then Covid. Affected everybody, hit everybody, plus everyone we work with’
- ‘through Covid, proud of people who’ve worked so hard, done visits, put themselves at risk, covered EDT’
- ‘how do we as a county bring things together, across 4 localities and solve things together’



Conclusions

- Plans in place and activity underway, but this was not yet consistently impacting
- History of similar themes around consistency and an overall lack of sufficient pace in tackling all the areas of concern
- Council leadership determined to improve services and respond effectively to Covid-19
- Stronger focus and drive, with additional capacity in place, is beginning to make the progress needed
- Developing a stronger performance culture in children's services.
- Strong multi-agency partnership in place which can use the learning from Covid-19 to drive forward change
- Positive feedback from the Ofsted Monitoring Visit
- Council will face further challenges as Covid-19 continues to be a significant factor impacting on everyone, both professionally and personally. The focus on improving children's services will need to continue in this context.
- The Improvement Partnership will provide oversight, and support and challenge



Recommendations to the Council and its partners



1. Continue to act on the improvement plan and focus on the priorities, overseen by the Improvement Partnership
2. Prioritise agreeing a recruitment and retention strategy, as part of a robust wider workforce strategy addressing training and development, including coaching for front line managers.
3. Strengthen the arrangements to ensure county wide consistency and accountability, balancing local delivery and needs.
4. Develop and strengthen locality working and the role of the Locality Director to improve local delivery and co-ordination of the local response to need.
5. Ensure that a comprehensive programme is in place to support and fully embed a restorative approach to practice, partnership and leadership.
6. Bring in additional expertise and capacity, initially through the PIP arrangement with Cornwall to support improvement.
7. Explore regional opportunities for greater collaboration on recruitment, embedding restorative practice and tackling exploitation.
8. Deliver a robust approach to performance management across the whole service, supported by management information improvements and consistent clear communication, driven by a determination to improve outcomes for children and young people.

Recommendations to the Minister and DfE



- As there are adequate arrangements in place to drive improvement forward, there is no need to commission an additional Commissioner review, or to consider any alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care.
- The role of Commissioner in Devon should be retained for a further period of six months to provide support, advice and challenge to the leadership and to ensure continuity during a time of transition to a new DCS and new Head of Children's social care. The Commissioner should continue to attend the Improvement Partnership.
- The Commissioner should provide regular updates to the DfE and lead a review of progress within 6 months.