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**Meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee 13<sup>th</sup> March 2023**

**Report of the Director of Children's Services**

**Children's Services Improvement Update**

**Purpose of report**

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Scrutiny Committee on the progress of the improvement actions set out in the 2022/23 Improvement Plan, and in the oversight of the Dudley Children's Improvement Partnership.

**Recommendations**

2. It is recommended:
  - That this updated report is received by the Committee for information and comment
  - That the Committee notes the outcome of the Ofsted ILACS inspection from November 2022, and that this shapes the next development plan
  - That the Committee notes the recommendation of the Department of Education that Dudley Children's Services is no longer in need of support and supervision

**Background**

3. The Committee received the previous report on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2022, which set out progress against the five areas of the 2022/23 Improvement Plan. These are listed below for ease of reference:
  1. Restorative Model of Practice
  2. Whole System

3. Learning Organisation
4. Partnership Working
5. Workforce

The improvement journey for the authority was shared with Ofsted in their full inspection (October and November 2022) of the Children's Directorate. Their findings were published on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2023, and identifies that Dudley is an authority that requires improvement to be good. This was in line with the self-evaluation presented to the inspecting team, who found that:

*'senior leaders are under no illusions about the services and practices which require improvement. The Chief Executive, Lead Member and the children's services leadership team are aware of the challenges faced in ensuring Dudley's most vulnerable children are kept safe and enabled to thrive'.*

At the same time, Hertfordshire were working alongside the Authority and completing a diagnostic exercise – auditing of children's records and the progress made alongside extensive staff interviews. This was undertaken as part of our preparation to adopt Family Safeguarding and was a helpful triangulation alongside the Ofsted report. Hertfordshire found that there was an open, reflective and optimistic workforce; that there was a stable and visible leadership, and where the impact of the practice model was bringing about change, although this was not yet consistently in place.

#### **4. Children's Improvement Partnership:**

The Dudley Children's Improvement Partnership has been overseen by the DfE appointed Improvement Advisor, Alastair Gibbons. The Partnership has continued to meet bimonthly and to specifically review the progress made in respect of delivering improved outcomes for the children of Dudley.

It is of note that the Partnership Meeting of 18<sup>th</sup> January 2023 confirmed the decision to conclude the partnership. This followed the recommendation of the Chair, noting the Ofsted judgement that had been received and in the light of the onward plan set out by the Directorate. This was an important decision on the part of the partnership, recognising the confidence in the foundations for improvement that have been set across the Directorate, as well as the commitment to partnership working through the now established Children and Young Person's Board, the Children's Group Safeguarding People Partnership and the Family Safeguarding Board.

## **Dept of Education oversight through Support and Supervision:**

Dudley Children's Services have been subject to support and supervision for some considerable while, and longer than might usually be expected. This oversight is formally reviewed on a 6 monthly basis, and is reported to the Children's Minister.

On January 19<sup>th</sup> 2023, the authority met with the DfE alongside the Improvement Advisor. In his 3 monthly Advisor Report, Alastair Gibbons had set out that leadership, organisation and performance were now much stronger, and that this provided a foundation for delivering transformational practice and cultural change.

The DfE letter (report) back to the authority notes the substantive progress made; it recognises that the service is aware of the continued challenges, particularly in relation to recruiting and retaining social work staff. However, they were positive in relation to the onward plan that we have in place and recognised '*the significant amount of effort that leaders have committed to improving services for children and families in Dudley*'.

The decision with regards to the formal oversight through support and supervision is a Ministerial decision. The DfE have confirmed their recommendation that this intervention through Support and Supervision should now be ended.

## **Family Safeguarding:**

This is a model of children's social work where adult facing workers are also in the team, with expertise in substance misuse, poor mental health and domestic abuse. It was developed in Hertfordshire, and they are supported through the DfE with a national team to facilitate this model across other authorities; we are the 19<sup>th</sup> local authority to formally implement this model.

We had previously taken some steps towards multi-disciplinary working in the development of our two **Family Comes First** (FCF) teams, designed to work with families where children were on the edge of care. Implemented in January 2022, the service transferred from Early Help into children's social care in July 2022. This development was based on learning from a peer authority, and had a clear focus on enabling children to remain with their families. The close collaboration and commissioning with key partners has enabled money mentors, substance misuse workers

and emotional well being staff to be deployed alongside social worker and family support workers.

In the year since their inception, the FCF teams have worked with 219 children in total. The teams have built their skills during this time and this has supported their capacity to work with children when their needs change – for example, at the outset, if there was a need to consider child protection, the team would not continue working with the family; this is no longer the case and the team has the skill and confidence to continue their work rather than change teams and social workers.

Over the 12 months, the total number of children that have needed to become looked after from the FCF teams has been 9, which is a positively small cohort. Of all children identified as being on the edge of care and worked with through FCF, 93% of the children did not need to become looked after. This too is strong evidence of the effectiveness of a whole family, multi-disciplinary approach.

Family Safeguarding, a model that builds on the multi-disciplinary way of working, has been seen to reduce the number of children in need of protection and the number of children who are in need of becoming looked after. Importantly, it is also attractive to staff and has a good track record in staff retention.

The Council has provided the financial support to enable the model to be adopted; the DfE has supported the service through the deployment of the Hertfordshire team; the staff are keen to progress this way of working – Hertfordshire diagnostic notes that *'there is an excitement for Family Safeguarding and an expectation that it will make a difference'*

### **Forward plan:**

Ofsted has set out 5 areas of improvement for the authority, and these are listed below for ease of reference:

- The quality, consistency and timeliness of all assessments, plans, supervision and the recording of management decisions and their rationale
- The early consideration of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline for children at risk of harm
- Management oversight of children in unregulated settings
- The promotion of advocacy and participation opportunities for children in care and care leavers
- Frontline workforce sufficiency

The sufficiency across our children's workforce at the front line remains an area of substantive challenge. The Ofsted Report noted the comprehensive workforce development plan is in place, but recognises the risk posed to this in the fragility of the current workforce. Our monthly Workforce Board in January 2023 noted that we have a 18% social worker vacancy level at this point, and a 12-month turnover rate of 19%. This inevitably means a change of social worker for a child and their family.

The deployment of the Market Forces Supplement (November 2022) for key roles has delivered impact, but this has not been as effective in the core service area for Support and Safeguarding, which remains the most difficult area for recruitment.

We have recruited alternatively qualified staff into our teams, in order to support where some tasks do not require a social worker. This has been well received and has formed part of the work, alongside FCF, for future planning of multi-disciplinary teams.

We are attending Compass Jobs Fair in March, to build on the reputational and recruitment success of last year. We have worked closely with colleagues in the Region in the consistent use of our shared Memorandum of Practice; this is strengthened in agreeing that authorities will not take staff on an agency basis who have resigned from permanent positions in other authorities.

We have a Workforce Board that continues a sole focus on social work. It is evident that we need to consider retention support to staff who remain loyal to the community here in Dudley. We are also looking to develop the social work career path, enabling progression to Advanced Practitioner in each team. We have achieved more recent success with a search model for recruitment and are working with HR Colleagues on maximising each of these opportunities. None the less, it does require swift and responsive action from across all parts of the authority to support effective and timely deployment – the compliance checks in recruitment, the IT kit in arriving at the Authority, the responsive management tools to support retention.

The workforce development plan continues and more widely, our forward plan is informed, but not confined by the Ofsted actions. It is set in our wider redesign and in the implementation of Family Safeguarding. There are three key pillars that set the structure of the next phase of our continued improvement:

1. To deploy Family Safeguarding, supported through the national practice team. This will include close working with Walsall and

Telford & Wrekin, two other authorities in our region who have adopted the model

2. To deliver our Directorate redesign, supporting a more seamless experience for our families – right place, right approach, right service. There will be reduced points of transition for children and the greater capacity for children to stay with their families
  3. To make best use of the leadership training programme deployed across the Directorate. A formal programme has been designed with the DfE and alongside our OD; it is financially supported through a grant. The impact will be reviewed through the Improvement Advisor, but importantly, in the development it has also shaped future leadership training across the authority. In addition, we have made good use of a national programme and 10 of our team managers or emerging team managers have accessed the Pathways Programme
5. This report is provided for information and update.

There are no representations made in the completion of the report, and no conflict of interest identified.

### **Finance**

6. There are no financial implications that are specific to this update. The resource identified to support the implementation of Family Safeguarding has been previously addressed.

### **Law**

7. There are no additional legal implications in receiving this report.

### **Risk Management**

8. There are no additional material risks identified in receiving this report

### **Equality Impact**

9. This report is by way of an update for the Committee; there is no identified impact on children or families with protected characteristics.
10. This updating report does not identify the need for equality impact assessment.

11. This report is to update the Committee on the impact of the Improvement plan. There has not been additional consultation with children or families in completing the report.

### **Human Resources/Organisational Development**

12. There are no HR implications in this report

### **Commercial/Procurement**

13. There are no commercial or procurement matters that are specifically raised in this updating report

### **Environment/Climate Change**

14. The updating report submitted does not demonstrate an impact on the environment

### **Council Priorities and Projects**

15. This updating report does not have additional impact in relation to the Council Plan. However, the impact of the work is aligned with the priorities in ensuring Dudley is a Safe and Healthy Borough



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