

Children's Services Scrutiny Panel

2 November 2022

Commenced: 6.00pm

Terminated: 7.35pm

Present: Councillors T Sharif (Chair), Martin, Owen, Patel, Reid, Robinson

Apologies: Councillors J Homer, T Smith, Welsh

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest submitted by members of the Scrutiny Panel.

17. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel held on 21 September 2022 were approved as a correct record.

18. CHILDREN'S PLACEMENT SUFFICIENCY

The Panel welcomed Tony Decrop, Assistant Director; Susan Harris, Head of Service; and Adrian Rocks, Head of Commissioning, to receive an update on placement strategy and capacity across in-house and external provision, including fostering recruitment.

Members received an overview of placement sufficiency, including information on legal duties set within the Children's Act and priorities detailed within the Council's Sufficiency Strategy titled Excellent Homes and Families.

National context included reference to a recent market study on children's social care placements. A report of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has highlighted the following findings:

- The market is not providing sufficient placements that fully meet children's needs when and where they require them resulting in negative outcomes.
- Some prices and profits are above levels expected in a well-functioning market.

Mr Decrop advised members that the new sufficiency strategy aims to support a change of culture and practice. Historically, Tameside has placed too many children in children's homes, with too few moved on to family environments or independence. Data showed that following a peak of 104 children in January 2021, improvement is visible with 74 children placed in children's homes at July 2022.

While the trajectory of improvement is good, more work is needed with Tameside remaining above statistical neighbours and equal to or above the numbers seen in bigger authorities and city councils.

There is improvement in the number of children living in residential care more than 20 miles from Tameside, with 16 children living at distance compared to 29 last summer. North West benchmarking also shows Tameside is in line with the regional average for Ofsted registered children's home costs for the first time (data back to 2018).

A summary of fostering showed that the authority is increasing the proportion of children living with families, with comparable fostering data reviewed for June 2021 and June 2022. The service is working to reduce the use of private agencies, with a priority to increase the proportion of children living with families. Mr Decrop advised that the number of children with in local authority provision is nearing that of statistical neighbours.

Members heard that a key challenge in leaving care options includes a legacy of young adults funded through Children's Services. This has been mitigated in the current financial year through investment in expansion of the 'Threshold Service' to support more young adults to live with appropriate support. A budget line of £2.3 million remains to fund placements for over 18s. Going forward a Staying Close DfE grant of £1.4 million will also provide additional focus and support for care leavers who have lived in children's homes.

A breakdown of current challenges and ongoing pressure includes:

- The mental health of teenagers
- Services to support our children who need the most care
- National shortage of placements and cost pressures
- Implementing fostering recruitment strategy
- Bespoke placements
- Low health contribution to complex placement costs when compared to other GM authorities

Ms Harris presented information specific to the Fostering Service. This providing added detail on the team, marketing and recruitment priorities, foster carer enquiries and conversions to assessment. Discussion touched upon the broader offer for Tameside foster carers, work with partners and employers, along with targets for growing numbers and retention.

The officers responded to a number of questions from the Panel on:

- The importance of placing children good quality provision
- Funding arrangements of other authorities regarding health contribution to cost of complex placements.
- Ofsted regulated care and placements for 16 and 17 year old children
- Improving fostering capacity and future targets
- Age profile of Tameside foster carers and retention aspects of the strategy

Mr Decrop, Ms Harris and Mr Rocks thanked for attending the meeting.

19. RESPONSE TO MID-YEAR BUDGET UPDATE

The Panel received for information, a letter of the Scrutiny Chairs to Councillor Jacqueline North, First Deputy (Finance, Resources and Transformation), in response to the mid-year budget update sessions held on 3 October 2022.

20. CHAIR'S UPDATE

The Chair updated members on a working group meeting that took place on 26 October 2022, as part of the review - Children's Workforce Strategy (Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers). A response paper with recommendations to support work of the Executive will come to the next Scrutiny Panel on 11 January 2023.

The Chair advised members that following initial contact with the Chair of Manchester's Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel, to support a benchmarking exercise and visit. The Chair will now look to progress this and report findings and feedback to the Scrutiny Panel.

21. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

To note that the next meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel will take place on Wednesday 11 January 2023.

22. URGENT ITEMS

The Chair reported that there were no urgent items for consideration at this meeting.

CHAIR