

Children's Services Scrutiny Panel

4 October 2023

Commenced: 6.00pm

Terminated: 6.45pm

Present: Councillors Roderick (Chair), Tilbrook (Deputy), Fitzpatrick, Howarth, Karim, Martin, McLaren, Owen, T Smith

Apologies: Councillor Robinson

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

25. CHILDREN'S SAFETY

The Panel welcomed Councillor Bill Fairfoull, Deputy Executive Leader (Children & Families); Sandra Stewart, Chief Executive; and Allison Parkinson, Director of Children's Services, to receive an update specific to the safety of children in Tameside.

The Chief Executive thanked the Chair for the invitation to attend a reconvened meeting of the Scrutiny Panel. The purpose of the update is to provide panel members with additional context, reassurance and clarity regarding the current safety of children in Tameside. It had become apparent that a misunderstanding on this fundamental point had occurred from a previous meeting held on 13 September 2023. This was specific to children's safety, the robustness of current systems and incorrect information subsequently being shared outside of the meeting.

The Chief Executive confirmed that the undertaking of a recent diagnostic has led to a speedy and comprehensive appraisal of current services and systems within Children's Social Care. The outcomes of this have provided a high degree of confidence and certainty that children known to the authority are to be considered safe.

Quite rightly and as would be expected, it is not practicable for Children's Services to confirm with any degree of confidence or certainty that all children in the borough are safe, all of the time, specifically for those who are not known to services. Assurance was provided that should any concerns be raised about a child in Tameside that systems operate effectively and in a way that can react and safeguard children from immediate risk or harm.

It was confirmed that the diagnostic was undertaken with a heightened level of challenge and independence, that surpasses that of any standard checks and balances completed by the service itself or indeed that of such Peer Review / Peer Challenge. While areas for improvement and change were identified, the diagnostic provided the necessary assurances that systems are behaving as would be expected, by identifying and highlighting concerns promptly.

The Deputy Executive Leader advised that questions and scrutiny of this nature are welcomed. With Tameside Council having a dedicated Children's Services Scrutiny Panel, the connection between the Executive and Scrutiny helps to ensure all are working well together and in the best interests of children and families. The recent diagnostic has confirmed that systems are robust and effective, something that has previously been supported by Ofsted inspections and monitoring visits, with no concerns raised regarding the ability of services to keep children safe.

The Director of Children's Services advised members that necessary changes have been made to certain processes and the service is continually checking they are producing the required results. There are issues around the quality and standards of practice not being consistent across the piece that need addressing. Achieving child-focused outcomes will remain a key driver for success. While concerted efforts have been made to drive improvement across all areas, there is now an opportunity to reflect and assess where immediate focus can be placed on the quality and consistency of social work practice.

The Panel asked about the methods to identify and respond where practice standards are judged to be substandard, along with the training and support needs that will ensure greater quality and consistency.

The Director of Children Services responded by explaining that this requires a whole system approach, to embed practice standards (Signs of Safety) with both targeted and universal training and to strengthen the audit and quality assurance processes. A priority going forward is for all services to become 'brilliant at the basics', which requires extra work with managers – for example, while the timeliness of visits has improved the quality of those visits is also a key consideration. We are focused on becoming better informed of what this translates to regarding outcomes for children and driving practice going forward.

Further detail was provided on actions delivered and to be take forward, this includes:

- A redrafting of the Children's Social Care Improvement Plan and Self Evaluation Framework
- Whole staff engagement sessions
- Leadership meetings held weekly
- Practice Week planned for November
- Creating a Workforce Board to address specific areas in achieving greater permanency in the children's workforce, supporting newly qualified social workers and creating a sense of place as an employer.

The Director of Children's Services advised members that service level data is good and can be relied upon. Next steps are to make better use of this and going forward establish a clearer set of parameters within which data can be used to inform delivery and planning.

The Chief Executive added final comments that Children's Services has and will remain a priority area for the Council. Examples of this include the ongoing budget commitment, investment and the consideration of past decisions to protect these services from the significance of budget reductions.

The Deputy Executive Leader and officers responded to a number of further points:

- The DCS is well supported internally has access to support and wider networks at a regional level.
- Future arrangements will be made that address any gaps in corporate parenting training for elected members and to consider the timeliness of such sessions and a future rolling programme.

Actions: The points for action include:

- Future items for the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel meeting on 8 November 2023.
 - Performance – to receive and comprehensively review the Children's Social Care and Early Help Scorecard to include the data dashboard and a cover report highlighting areas of concern and associated action planned.
 - Quality – summary of findings and learning from recent quality assurance work and audits, and how this has been translated into changes and improvements to practice.
 - Improvement – to share and run through the updated Children's Social Care Improvement Plan.
- Training for the Chair and panel member to be explored, specific to the oversight and Scrutiny of Children's Services

26. URGENT ITEMS

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

CHAIR