

Chair of the Integrated Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Oliver Ryan
Executive Member (Children and Families)

Councillor Gillian Peet

Richard Hancock
Director of Children's Services

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Ask for: Paul Radcliffe
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Dear Cllr Ryan and Mr Hancock,

Children's Services Improvement

I write on behalf of the Council's Integrated Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel. Members would like to thank you both for attending the meeting of 8 November 2018, at which a progress update was provided on the most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit and future improvement priorities.

The Scrutiny Panel has maintained regular oversight and contact with Children's Services since the initial inspection, and members are now mindful of the stage the Council is at within the improvement journey, the level of improvement still require and future expectations and timescales for the next Ofsted Monitoring Visit and re-inspection.

As Chair, my aim has always been to ensure that the Scrutiny Panel is able to support services to improve and deliver significant advancements to the quality of provision. The primary focus throughout all scrutiny activity has been that of a 'critical friend', by putting children first to achieve better outcomes for young people and families in Tameside.

By taking time to reflect on the information presented on 8 November 2018, I would now like to share the views of the Panel with you. This letter therefore aims to provide a summary of discussion points and to relay any issues or concerns. I hope this is something which you will find useful, with its possibility to inform future decision making and evidence the future working relationship between Children's Services and the Integrated Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel.

I would also like to inform you that a fixed Children's Working Group has been established for the remainder of the 2018/19 municipal year, with agreed terms of reference. I have included the document for information and I sincerely hope that this is something your management team is able to support, with regards to the identification of priorities and provision of information at the group's request. The working group is to be chaired by Councillor Teresa Smith, in her capacity as Deputy Chair to the Integrated Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel.

I have listed some of the main discussion points below, which are to be viewed as individual responses from panel members, under the collective of the main panel. The Scrutiny Panel acknowledges all work undertaken and improvements to date.

It was both encouraging and positive to hear that:

- Plans to achieve greater stability and consistency are being addressed, with the permanent appointments to the Director of Children's Services, Assistant Director and Heads of Services. Members are extremely keen for a strengthened and more stable leadership team to be delivered, which in turn should become a catalyst for improved social worker retention and the Council's ability to attract good quality social workers and managers.
- Despite recurrent Ofsted findings to improve the pace of improvement, the information presented provides a greater level of assurance and expectation that 2019 will be a year of rapid and sustained improvement. The Panel are aware that the pace has indeed already increased from the slow start in 2016.
- Children's governance arrangements have been strengthened by sight of the review paper presented to Executive Cabinet on 25 July 2018. This includes a strengthening of the Council's Corporate Parenting Board, as well as an engaged Youth Council and Children in Care Council. Members were pleased to observe the comments of a renewed direction and commitment expressed by Councillor Ryan, supported by the new Director of Children's Services (DCS).
- Plans are afoot for new safeguarding arrangements, enabling Tameside to be considered somewhat of a pathfinder in this area with regards to stakeholder involvement and delivery.
- Work has been undertaken to develop a new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (Mash).

The Panel would like to thank you both for the honest acknowledgement of the challenges faced and the improvement work that remains. I have done my best to articulate some of the main discussion points and views where it is felt that change and progress is still needed. These include:

- The continued poor quality of social work practice (recordings) and supervision remains a worry for the Panel. This includes concerns around the lack of quality in the assessments and plans observed by Ofsted, given that two years have now passed since the initial inspection.
- The Panel was pleased to hear that the high caseloads which have been a consistent factor now appear to be coming down (on average). The high workforce ratio and reliance on agency social workers and managers does stand out as a problem that needs to be addressed, especially with the aims to achieve greater consistency and quality of practice.
- The Panel has previously received projections for what numbers should or could look like in Tameside for both referrals and the total of looked after children, when compared with statistical neighbours. I am aware that we remain in a situation where both are much higher than we would expect or like, and that this ultimately provides a knock-on effect to overall caseload numbers and the need for higher staffing levels.

- On behalf of the Panel I can reaffirm your ambitions to reduce the workforce ratio of agency workers to that which would seem fitting for an authority such as Tameside. I do however recognise that this will ultimately be achieved and determined by overall caseload numbers and the future application of thresholds and successful step downs from social care intervention.
- The safety of children is quite clearly a priority for Children's Services. The Panel are aware that high numbers of children are in contact with social care, whether that is children in need, child protection or looked after children. In the longer term the Panel would like to see evidence of earlier intervention work to strengthen families and support networks, leading to better outcomes for children and families.

A final reflection is that the Panel does have a 'going concern' for the total number of caseloads and the possibility that there may actually be too many children receiving social care intervention at this time. This is not something that appears to be sustainable and in some cases may not be right for the children and families concerned.

The mechanisms that the Council puts in place to support the social care system can also play a huge roll in this and the Panel would like to see how improved outcomes can be achieved through better use of the MASH, permanence planning, accessible and effective early help for struggling families and appropriate and safe step down arrangements, underpinned by the need to strengthen families and their coping mechanisms.

This hopefully provides you with insight to the views of the Scrutiny Panel and I hope this is received in the manner in which it is intended, that is, to support the work of services to improve outcomes for Tameside children and families. I do not consider this letter to require a formal response, but would like regular contact to be maintained and key plans and messages shared with the Scrutiny Panel on an on-going basis.

If any further clarity is needed on any of the above points, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Gillian Peet
Chair – Integrated Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel