

Schools, Children and Families Overview & Scrutiny Committee

20th July 2016

SWOT ANALYSIS – BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN’S SERVICES – JULY 2016

Andrew Christie – Children’s Commissioner

STRENGTHS

- Birmingham City Council [BCC] has stabilised its arrangements for the senior leadership of its Children’s Social Care Services. Virtually all the senior leadership posts are now filled by experienced and competent professionals, in the permanent employ of the Council.
- BCC has settled on an operating model which, in the main, is well organised and sensibly constructed.
- BCC has provided Children’s Social Care Services with the additional financial resources to ensure that social workers have manageable caseloads, in most parts of the service.
- After its recent (June 2016) monitoring inspection, Ofsted reported that it found evidence of improvement in practice in some areas, notably in the Safeguarding Service.

WEAKNESSES

- Ofsted identified weaknesses in the MASH arrangements. Further work needs to be done to ensure that safe and efficient arrangements are in place; that there is comprehensive management oversight; that thresholds are properly understood and applied (by the Service and partner agencies); and that children receive the help they need promptly.
- The new arrangements for the Assessment and Short Term Intervention Service (ASTI) are still bedding in. Changes are being made to ensure that social workers have reasonable caseloads.
- Although progress has been made, the Service still depends upon too many agency staff.
- The quality of practice is still too variable. The ability of first line managers to provide good quality supervision is also too variable. The Service needs to give particular attention to improving protection and help for children at risk of sexual exploitation.
- In the above mentioned monitoring inspections, Ofsted identified failure by the Disabled Children’s Service to protect some children; a weakness which had not previously been identified by the Service.
- During this inspection Ofsted also identified weaknesses in safeguarding arrangements for vulnerable children in the education system. This included children with a statement of special educational need or Education, Health or Care Plan who

had been without a school place for some considerable time; and a lack of a coordinated oversight. Again this was a weakness which had not previously been identified by the senior management team.

- The Council considers that its provision for children with special educational needs is inadequate and requires overhaul both of the education made available and the case management of provision for individual children

OPPORTUNITIES

- The Children's Service has the opportunity to develop its workforce strategy to improve the supply of skilled and well trained social workers and first line managers. It has been invited to become a partner in the Frontline programme. It is a participant in the Step Up Programme. It can recruit good quality newly qualified social workers. In addition it can develop a programme to improve the skills and confidence of its first line managers. Birmingham can benefit from its scale in such developments
- BCC has appointed a new Independent Chair of its Local Safeguarding Children's Board who brings great expertise and experience. She can be expected to facilitate significant improvements in the crucial partnership arrangements.
- The Service has now identified a partner and can proceed to develop plans for a Regional Adoption Agency.
- The Council has decided to examine the case for placing its Children's Services in a Trust. This affords the opportunity for there to be a step change in governance arrangements, providing the Service with oversight, support and challenge from a board selected for its particular expertise.

THREATS

- Birmingham's Children's Services faces a full Ofsted inspection, likely to be scheduled for shortly after the summer holidays. These inspections are very onerous exercises in their own right. BCC has worked to try to ensure that the Service reaches a standard where it will be judged as 'Requiring Improvement'. However, the recent monitoring inspection result would indicate that the Service has not made sufficient progress and so is much less likely to reach the desired standard. Birmingham Children's Services is subject to a very high level of scrutiny from the regulator.
- Developing the proposals for the Trust arrangements is a complex and time consuming process. Work on these plans should not be allowed to divert attention from the core improvement task. In addition staff and partners will need to be reassured that the plans are in the best interests of Birmingham's vulnerable children.