

Strengthening Services Board

To: Children and Young People Committee

Meeting Date: 8 March 2023

From: Executive Director of Children's Services

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: N/A

Outcome: The required outcome is for the Strengthening Services Board to lead on implementing improved partnership working and services for the most vulnerable children and families in Cambridgeshire.

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to agree the following:

- a) The establishment of a Strengthening Services Board for Cambridgeshire, with Independent Chair, working with partners.
- b) Development of a clear, costed improvement programme and business case for Children's Services by the end of March 2023.

Voting arrangements: Co-opted members of the Committee are eligible to vote on these items.

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Member contacts:

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1. Background

- 1.1 In December 2022 the Local Safeguarding Board requested a deep dive into the work of the Integrated Front Door for Children's Services. The outcome of this highlighted some concerns in practice within Cambridgeshire, including the quality of front-line social work practice and the management oversight of that practice, especially risk assessments. The service is due a full inspection from Ofsted in the summer of 2023, therefore it is imperative that we apply pace and purpose to our improvement to ensure a strong position at the start of this inspection and to improve outcomes in sustainable manner, with partner agencies.
- 1.2 There is evidence from elsewhere in the country that using a bespoke Strengthening Service Board for Children's Services is a good way of focusing efforts and securing the necessary improvements, at pace. Many of the issues in respect of Children's Services are system-wide, so the full and active involvement of our key partner agencies is a pre-requisite for the success of this approach. It is proposed to designate this group as the Cambridgeshire Strengthening Services Board. This name has been used in Dorset Council to achieve positive outcomes whilst using an overtly strengths-based framework.

2. Main Issues

2.1 THE RATIONALE

- 2.1.1 The Political Leadership of the Council and the Chief Executive are all supportive of the need for a Strengthening Services Board, with an independent chair. They are particularly keen to ensure this operates as a systemwide improvement board, not just focussing on Children's Social Care within the County Council. This emphasis is important because safeguarding, the duty of co-operate and delivered improved outcomes for children in care is a shared responsibility across statutory partners within the county. Increasingly, the associated regulators and inspectorates of all these public sector agencies focus on not only that agency's response to vulnerability, but upon the partnership and collective system response to such issues. Therefore, it is best to approach such improvement in holistic manner, with safeguarding children and young people as the common requirement.
- 2.1.2 The Cambridgeshire Strengthening Services Board is proposed to adopt a "Child First" series of principles in developing its Terms of Reference. The value of this is to approach improvement through the lens of a child and to bring about quantifiable and measurable improvements in the lived experience of the most vulnerable children and young people in Cambridgeshire. All successful children's services depend upon reliable systems like case recording, allocation and review with the quality of work supported by management oversight. A child focus can then be strengthened but only if effective underlying systems are in place. Cambridgeshire, as a partnership, needs to re-set a number of systems before it then builds a stronger Child First culture. A formal Board dedicated just to this focus and to nothing else is therefore deemed essential to support these step changes. The Committee is advised that this Board would not substitute for or assume any of the democratic accountabilities or responsibilities of this Committee, it would however complement the work of the Committee and provide a focus for improvements within a partnership context. (**Recommendation a**).

2.1.3 The proposed Board cannot work in isolation, so it is equally important to identify how these improvements are going to be made – defining what they are, defining the resource needed to make them happen and how to do this within the parameters of a clear programme and associated business case which can be understood by all employees internally and by all partners externally. This should be in place by the end of March 2023 at the latest (**Recommendation b**).

2.2 THE CURRENT CONTEXT

2.2.1 Following the identification of the increased complexities in the casework within children's services a commitment has been given by senior leaders across the statutory partners (the County Council, the NHS and the Police) to take steps to improve responses to children with the most complex needs in Cambridgeshire. Whilst many issues, such as the shortage of emergency placements are national issues, senior leaders rightly consider that there are steps they can take locally to improve the situation, such as:

- Consideration of joint senior leadership training, including how all the agencies collectively respond and behave under pressure in a crisis. This approach should build on the approach taken to train Strategic/Tactical/Operational leaders (Gold/Silver/Bronze) jointly in how to respond to major incidents. This will necessitate revised joint guidance and joint Council/Police/NHS attendance at the training to improve collective awareness, knowledge and capabilities.
- Development of a clear statement from all organisations to be shared with officers and employees across the system making clear that i) we accept there are improvements required to the way that we are working collectively to address complex cases, and ii) that we commend the officers and employees that are already working hard within our system to ensure the needs of the children and young people are put first, in-line with our statutory, regulatory (HMICFRS, CQC, Ofsted) and moral duties, including clear reference to the professional registration / attestation of police constables and the professional/regulatory standards applicable to all; and, iii) that there is collective Chief Executive / Chief Constable level commitment across all these agencies to a system-owned and sustainable solution for tackling such issues that may arise in the future.

2.2.2 A similar approach can be taken to any single issue arising about children's services, under the aegis of a Strengthening Services Board, attended by senior leaders. Examples could be in response to the prevention of serious youth violence and in ensuring the 'front-door' of children's services performs to a high standard in terms of call handling, triaging and prioritisation. Given ongoing increases in the volume and complexity of incoming cases, this could be an important standing item on Strengthening Services Board agenda.

2.2.3 Care will need to be taken not to duplicate the work of overlapping Boards or governance structures for the major issues of the day. With this in mind, the Strengthening Services Board would need to be actively supported by a programme manager, working across partners and funded by the County Council as part of our clear commitment to enabling system wide improvements. The financial request to enable this is included as an appendix to the Finance Monitoring Report.

2.2.4 It is proposed that the Board meets monthly, in order to deal adequately with significant issues concerned and our collective focus upon improvement. This means senior leaders allocating the necessary time for this purpose. It is also proposed that the Board is chaired by a suitably experienced independent chair, who can command the trust and respect of all partners and who is fluent across the statutory partners. This also enable the Council, NHS and the Police to work as equal status partners inside the Board.

2.3 GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO INSPECTION OUTCOMES

- 2.3.1 Recent audits and case reviews indicate that Cambridgeshire will currently struggle to improve upon the previous inspection judgement of “Requires Improvement” and that a reduction to an “Inadequate” rating is a potential risk, which would trigger Government intervention. Should the Council retain a “Requires Improvement” rating post inspection, that may still trigger a proportionate intervention by the Department for Education, because it may be deemed as evidence the Council does not have a clear path to “Good”. Intervention remains the Government’s general policy approach with 47 local authorities having left intervention since May 2010 and not having returned to this level of active involvement by Government. 85% of re-inspections of “Inadequate” rated Local Authorities subject to intervention approaches have achieved better outcomes.
- 2.3.2 Either of these potential judgments following a full inspection later this year may result in Cambridgeshire being paired with a sector-led improvement authority (SLIP). SLIP Local Authorities are those that have been judged to be “Good” or “Outstanding” by Ofsted. Nearby local authorities providing services at this level of inspection judgment are Essex and Lincolnshire County Councils.
- 2.3.4 Local authorities subject to Government intervention typically have features which include higher levels of agency staff, high levels of qualified social work vacancies, re-referrals, children in care and child protection plans. This data also routinely correlates with the turnover of employees and the potential for delay in delivering improved outcomes for children and young people. Local data indicates that Cambridgeshire may be considered to be in this position, given the known issues we are dealing with, particularly the workforce challenges and complex case levels.
- 2.3.5 An Improvement Board, or equivalent, is nearly always the vehicle for co-ordinating and driving forward enhancements to services and partnership working. Acting collectively in this way will credibly demonstrate to Ofsted and to the Department for Education that Cambridgeshire as a system has not simply ‘hoped for the best’ in the forthcoming 2023 inspection and, instead, has approached improvement actively. This may, in turn, positively influence the narrative of the upcoming inspection and those that subsequently take place in our partner agencies.

3. Alignment with corporate priorities

- 3.1 Environment and Sustainability
There are no significant implications for this priority.
- 3.2 Health and Care
There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.3 Places and Communities
There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.4 Children and Young People
The report above sets out the implications for this priority in 2.1.2

3.5 Transport
There are no significant implications for this priority.

4. Significant Implications

4.1 Resource Implications
The financial implications of this report are shown in the appendix to the Finance Monitoring Reporting at this meeting.

4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications
All procurement activity linked to the establishment and running of this Board, including that of consultants, will be compliant with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules.

4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications
The report above sets out details of significant implications in 2.3

4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.

4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.

4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement
There are no significant implications within this category.

4.7 Public Health Implications
The report above sets out details of significant implications in 2.2.1

4.8 Environment and Climate Change Implications on Priority Areas
Neutral

4.8.1 Implication 1: Energy efficient, low carbon buildings.
Neutral

4.8.2 Implication 2: Low carbon transport.
Neutral

4.8.3 Implication 3: Green spaces, peatland, afforestation, habitats and land management.
Neutral

4.8.4 Implication 4: Waste Management and Tackling Plastic Pollution.
Neutral

4.8.5 Implication 5: Water use, availability and management:

Neutral

4.8.6 Implication 6: Air Pollution.

Neutral

4.8.7 Implication 7: Resilience of our services and infrastructure and supporting vulnerable people to cope with climate change.

Neutral

Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance? Yes

Name of Financial Officer: Tom Kelly, Service Director: Finance and Procurement

Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the Head of Procurement and Commercial? Yes

Name of Officer: Clare Ellis

Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Council's Monitoring Officer or Pathfinder Legal? Yes

Name of Legal Officer: Linda Walker, Interim Director of Law and Governance

Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your EqIA Super User?

No (27 Feb 23)

Name of Officer:

Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications?

Yes

Name of Officer: Christine Birchall

Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact? Yes

Name of Officer: Elaine Redding

Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health?

Yes

Name of Officer: Jyoti Atri

If a Key decision, have any Environment and Climate Change implications been cleared by the Climate Change Officer?

No (27 Feb 23)

Name of Officer:

5. Source documents guidance

5.1 Source documents

None