

Parent and Carer Alliance



Care Action Protect Empower

Meeting with Director of Children's Services 19th September 2018

Lucy and Zoe introduced themselves and explained that the Parent and Carer Alliance had arisen from their own experiences of caring for children with additional needs and knowing how lonely and isolated carers can become. The Alliance is for sharing experiences, advice and tips on the reality of living with children with additional needs, and is about working together to improve families' lives and to improve services.

Chris Spencer started in post as Director of Children's Services in March this year. He explained his background as having worked as a teacher, an Educational Psychologist, Head of Family Services and then working to turnaround failing authorities.

He stated that Children's Services has had a poor history over the past 10 years as a failing authority.

The primary problem is staffing – there are not enough social workers and there is a high rate of staff turnover, which is devastating for families and children and badly affects the trust families and children can feel in the service.

There are some conditions that can enable improvement - an additional investment of £16 million and political support from all parties.

Steps that are being taken are

Improved technology – staff have remote access to the central system and access to interactive teleconferencing facilities;

Increasing staff numbers – will over recruit newly qualified social workers to reduce reliance on agency staff, and recruiting from abroad;

Making Gloucestershire a more attractive county to work in – by offering more student placements, more flexible working contracts to attract qualified social workers who have left social work, and to attract social workers who are working parents; and

Creating a social work academy that can enhance training for students and those returning to a career in social work.

There is also an underdeveloped market for services for children in Gloucestershire and he has employed an Assistant Director to look at working with organisations in the voluntary sector to support them in increasing provision. He would like to work with parent carers and their children in developing this provision so that the right services are commissioned to meet the need.

Bren McInerney, a community volunteer for Gloucestershire Care Services who made the initial contact with the Alliance to set up this meeting, said that it is essential to fully understand any providers of services for children, their organisational structure and ways of working, and that business providers should not be discounted if they are able to meet the needs of children within Gloucestershire. The development of the market should involve listening to the authentic voice of the users, not just commissioners of services.

Several issues were then discussed:

Families have difficulty accessing activities for their children if the providers are unable to care for their children, especially those with complex needs, as without sufficient funds to pay for Personal Assistants, such as with a social care direct payment, families have to stay with their children during the activity. This means that children do not get to experience independence from their parents and parents do not get any respite – thereby not meeting any needs.

Chris stated that he knew of no reduction in the budgets for Direct Payments so families should not be being told that their budgets will be cut unless the need for such payments had reduced.

There are significant difficulties in recruiting Personal Assistants. It is difficult to recruit PAs for short periods of care and for families in more rural areas the extended travel times for PAs to get to work means they won't accept the employment.

Social workers have not been in regular contact and are a reactive service, only responding when families contact them. Plans are being delayed and not issued; there is minimal involvement from social workers in the EHCP. Often there is no inclusion of social care needs in an EHCP, even when the child has a direct payment, as no social worker has sent information to the case worker or attended EHCP meetings and reviews.

Social workers have not been knowledgeable about other services that might support the family and offer advice. There should be a technological system in which they can input types of need, ages and location of families, which can then search a database and suggest services and organisations that could help.

Other members of the family are being designated as at risk but there is no intervention to support or protect them.

CYPS are not effective with Autistic children who have challenging and violent behaviours.

The Disabled Children and Young People Service has a threshold for assessment and provision of Personal budgets which is not understood by parent carers and appears to exclude children with Autism without carrying out an assessment to determine need.

Ineffective post adoption support is putting families at risk – Charlotte Jones, Head of Services for Children with Additional Needs, will look into this and report back to Chris.

There is disjointed working between education and social workers. OFSTED raised the issue of the 'off rolling' of pupils. Families have raised the issue of their children being excluded with the Inclusion Team and have been told that the Inclusion Team 'cannot challenge a maintained school'. Chris stated that he has the power to direct a school to take a pupil. A communication route is needed to inform him about schools excluding pupils and pupils not receiving the provision as stated in their support plans and EHCPs.

There has been a culture of blaming the parents if they raise issues or challenge decisions and support for their children. Parents are driven to suffer and children aren't getting the support they need. Chris stated that this is unacceptable. He doesn't care if parents and carers create a problem as they are taking on a life-long endeavour and are understandably concerned about their vulnerable children and their futures. He said that if all the complaint escalation processes had failed to provide a solution then email him as he is an advocate for vulnerable children.

Future Meetings

Chris will be happy to attend another meeting in 6 months.

He advised the Alliance to meet with other Heads of Services to speak about issues, and understand how thresholds are set and applied.

The Alliance explained that they have met with Edel Keating to discuss how they can work as Strategic Partners with the local authority and Health providers and are awaiting a response to their recent letter requesting details on how this can be supported by the local authority.