

Delivery of the T22 Children's Services Transformation Programme – Torfaen County Borough Council

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What we reviewed and why

- 1 In April 2019, Torfaen County Borough Council's (the Council) Cabinet agreed the mandate for the second phase of the T22 Transformation Programme with the following four priority areas:
 - Customer & Digital
 - Children's Services
 - Support services
 - Enabling Transformation
- 2 As part of our 2019-20 Audit Plan of the Council, we set out to undertake a review of an aspect of the delivery of its T22 Programme.
- 3 In November 2019¹, the Council's rate of looked after children per 10,000 child population was the highest in England and Wales and this was causing considerable financial challenges in Children's Services. We therefore identified Children's Services as the focus for this review because the growth in demand, cost and escalation presented the Council with a challenge that was big, complex and urgent, and continues to do so.
- 4 In April 2019, Cabinet agreed a number of initial (short-term) strategies to address the challenges in its Children's Services, including:
 - safely stepping down some looked after children; and
 - safely and efficiently triaging contacts about children and young people at the Council's front door².
- 5 The Council's Multi Agency Safeguarding and Support Hub (MASSH) went live in November 2019 and the Council also undertook a review of children's placements to consider 'Stepping Down' or 'Stepping Out' for a number of children from their current placements.
- 6 In February 2020, the Council's Children's Services Transformation Board approved the programme brief for the transformation of Children's services. The Children's Services programme brief identified the following vision for children and young people in Torfaen:
 - 'Our Vision for Torfaen is to ensure children and young people are given the BEST start in life and are supported to achieve their full potential, socially, emotionally and academically.'

¹ Children looked after at 31 March per 10,000 population aged under 18 by local authority and year (gov.wales)

² The 'front door' refers to the initial point of contact with children's social care when an initial assessment of the child and family's needs is undertaken and the Council decides if further support from social care may be needed. The Council's Multi Agency Safeguarding and Support Hub (MASSH) acts as this front door.

- 7 In the programme brief, the Council has also set four key aspirations to improve outcomes for children and young people;
- a. Be successful
 - b. Be healthy helping early
 - c. Be safe
 - d. Be supported
- 8 The Children's Services transformation programme brief set out five phases:
- a. Phase 1 Define and agree the transformation programme vision and roadmap (Quarters 3 and 4 2019);
 - b. Phase 2 Steadying the ship, managing demand (Quarters 1 and 2 2020);
 - c. Phase 3 Manage demand and implement strategies, cost avoidance (Quarters 3 and 4 2020);
 - d. Phase 4 Turning the tide, service re-design, new service delivery model (Quarters 1 and 2 2021); and
 - e. Phase 5 Turning the tide(Quarters 3 and 4 2021).
- 9 The Children's Services transformation programme brief set out a number of objectives that the programme aimed to deliver including:
- a. re-designing the Children's Social Care Medium Term Financial Plan;
 - b. implementing revised performance management;
 - c. strengthening the Council's approach to Looked After Children's placements;
 - d. commissioning; and
 - e. increasing school attendance, attainment and behaviours.
- 10 Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020 the Council's overarching T22 transformation board agreed to reduce the scale of transformation activity to focus on four priority projects out of the seven projects. The Council continued to implement those four projects, albeit at a slower pace and reduced scale. The four priority projects were;
- Threshold of need
 - Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub
 - Performance Management Framework
 - Stepping stones
- As a result, the other three projects, Service Review of the Family Placement Team, Strength-based (asset-based) and risk management practice model, and Early Intervention and Prevention (EI&P) were paused.
- 11 We recognise that this decision meant that the timescales set out in the Council's Children's Services programme brief agreed in February 2020 could not be adhered to for all seven projects and we have sought to take account of the Council's decision during our review.

- 12 In early July 2020, the Council's Cabinet considered a paper setting out the impact of the initial modelling of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Council's financial position. The Council identified 'a continued pressure in the levels of children requiring social care support against the agreed budget level'.

Focus and purpose of the review

- 13 The focus and purpose of this review was to provide assurance that the Council is effectively delivering its T22 Children's Services transformation programme. We also sought to provide insight around any transferable principles or approaches for the Council's wider T22 transformation programme.
- 14 We undertook the review during the period August to October 2020. The regional Care Inspectorate Wales manager joined the interviews and focus groups during the review and attended key meetings with Council leaders and officers.
- 15 Following the completion of our fieldwork in October 2020 we submitted our findings to the Council in early December 2020. Following clearance of those findings we then facilitated a feedback workshop with the Council's Cabinet and Senior Leadership team in late March 2021. In that workshop we presented our areas of assurance and areas for development against our review questions and invited the Council to start developing its response to those findings.
- 16 Part 1 of this report sets out our findings and Part 2 sets out the Council's response to those findings.

What we found

- 17 Our review sought to answer the question: **Is the Council effectively delivering its T22 Children's Services transformation programme?**
- 18 Overall we found that: **To more effectively deliver the children's services transformation programme's outcomes the Council now needs to drive progress and collective action to secure improved outcomes.** We reached this conclusion because:
- whilst the Council has a robust evidence base for the social care aspects of its children's services transformation programme, it needs to identify and more comprehensively implement evidence based early intervention and prevention models.
 - the Council's vision for its children's services transformation is ambitious but it needs to develop clearer measures of success to monitor its progress towards its intended outcomes.
 - the Council initially set a clear timescale for the children's services transformation programme and adjusted that in light of COVID. The Council now needs to develop a clear roadmap that identifies the order and timescales for the future delivery of the programme.

- the Council has effective mechanisms to monitor progress against the programme's project outputs, but needs to develop more effective mechanisms to drive progress against the intended programme outcomes.
- due in part to COVID, the Council's delivery against its children's services transformation programme priorities and timescales slowed and the Council will now need to take collective action to address this to achieve the programme's intended outcomes.
- the implementation of the Council's Children's Services transformation programme has identified the need to develop transformation skills further across the Council.
- staff and partners generally feel fully engaged with the Council's Children's Services transformation programme.
- the Council may need to address a range of risks as it continues to deliver its transformation programmes.

Part One: Our Review Findings

To more effectively deliver the children's services transformation programme's outcomes, the Council now needs to drive progress and collective action to secure improved outcomes

Whilst the Council has a robust evidence base for the social care aspects of its children's services transformation programme, it needs to identify and more comprehensively implement evidence based early intervention and prevention models

- 19 We reviewed the extent to which;
- the Council had reviewed and taken account of relevant evidence to inform its proposed changes to children's social care; and
 - the Council had reviewed and taken account of relevant evidence to inform its proposed changes to the wider children's services approach.
- 20 In reaching this conclusion we identified the following key assurances and areas for development:

Assurances

- good levels of understanding as to why children's social care needs to transform;
- recognition of the substantial negative impact on children and young people's and their families' long-term outcomes;
- understanding of the financial pressures due to increasing number of children looked after, including the cost of accommodating children;
- clear and robust evidence for children's social care changes including, threshold of need, a safeguarding hub and a strength-based practice model; and
- subsequent adoption of evidence-based practice models for the safeguarding hub.

Areas for development

- in line with the transformation vision, identify relevant and robust evidence to support the early intervention and prevention aspects to focus on the areas that may potentially deliver the greatest impact; and
- more comprehensively implement evidence based early intervention and prevention models.

The Council's vision for its children's services transformation is ambitious but it needs to develop clearer measures of success to monitor its progress towards its intended outcomes

21 We reviewed how clearly:

- the Council had set out its vision for its wide ranging children's services transformation programme; and
- the Council has set out its intended outcomes and measures of success to ensure that it can track progress towards its outcomes.

22 In reaching this conclusion we identified the following key assurance and areas for development:

Assurances

- aspirational vision in line in light of the scale and complexity of the challenge; and
- four high level key outcomes underpinning the vision.

Areas for development

- further clarify the end vision and ensure ownership of that across all other relevant services across the Council and with partners (integration and collaboration) to create efficiency;
- establish critical success factors and how those will be measured to ensure quality of the outcomes;
- ensure a clear programme 'Golden thread' of objectives, goals, strategies to achieve the vision;
- review the clarity of the route map back from the intended vision rather than towards it;
- develop clear outcomes for Outcomes 1 and 2, not outputs;
- periodically review financial savings that can realistically be delivered;

- periodically ensure horizon scanning to understand and plan for potential demand that may be caused by the medium to longer-term impacts of COVID.

The Council initially set a clear timescale for the children’s services transformation programme and adjusted that in light of COVID. The Council now needs to develop a clear roadmap that identifies the order and timescales for the future delivery of the programme

23 We reviewed how clearly:

- the Council has ordered its actions to bring about its children’s services transformation; and
- the Council has set out its timescales for achieving the transformation.

24 In reaching this conclusion we identified the following key assurance and areas for development:

Assurances

- programme brief set out initial timescales;
- the individual projects focus on key changes;
- five priority projects initially focussed on children’s social care; and
- during initial response to COVID in 2020, revised delivery plans were developed with amended timescales.

Areas for development

- roll out threshold of need training and embed practice within social care initially;
- ensure partner organisations understand threshold of need;
- implement strength-based practice model across social care and partners;
- ensure effective links between Stepping Stones and Family Placement team to ensure sufficient capacity to meet need in short and longer term;
- identify cohorts of children looked after and their pathways of care and review regularly;
- clarify timescales for the delivery of actions/outputs under Outcomes 1 and 2 signed off by the CSTPB in October 2020; and
- review timescale for delivery of the transformation programme.

The Council has effective mechanisms to monitor progress against the programme's project outputs, but needs to develop more effective mechanisms to drive progress against the intended programme outcomes

25 We reviewed whether:

- the Council has established effective mechanisms to monitor its progress in achieving its Children's Services transformation intended outcomes both at a project and programme level.

26 In reaching this conclusion we identified the following key assurance and areas for development:

Assurances

- approved Programme brief that sets the intended four high level programme outcomes;
- clear mechanisms to report progress against activity at a project level;
- clear mechanisms to report and escalate individual project risks; and
- clear processes to monitor financial progress.

Areas for development

- review programme monitoring arrangements to ensure monitoring of progress against critical success factors as well as outcomes, time and cost;
- consider if the performance management framework is providing the right insight to allow effective challenge and intervention at all relevant levels;
- review effectiveness of the Children's Services Transformation Programme Board in driving constructive challenge to achieve intended outcomes to time and cost;
- review and prioritise agenda items for Children's Services Transformation Programme Board;
- consider Scrutiny's involvement in monitoring and challenging progress; and
- ensure a consistent approach to Red, Amber and Green status in project and programme reports.

Due in part to COVID, the Council's delivery against its children's services transformation programme priorities and timescales slowed and the Council will now need to take collective action to address this to achieve the programme's intended outcomes

27 We reviewed whether:

- the Council is effectively delivering against its Children's Services transformation priorities and timescales.

28 In reaching this conclusion we identified the following key assurance and areas for development:

Assurances

- agreed programme of activity with clear priorities and initial timescales;
- prioritisation took place during initial COVID response;
- data shows that MASSH slowed the rate of increased referrals from around 12% to 4% between 2018-19 and 2019-20, but 2020-21 is seeing an upturn;
- Council's self-assessment of progress in July 2020:
 - Good = MASSH/Performance Management/Programme Management;
 - Good but delayed by COVID-19 = Risk-Strengths Practice Model/Stepping Stones/Family Placement/Procurement;
 - Slow = Thresholds of Need and Workstreams 1 and 2. Agreed programme of activity with clear priorities and initial timescales.

Areas for development

- overall pace of delivery;
- embed the Stepping Stones model into business as usual;
- consider capacity to deliver transformation to timescale and business as usual;
- consider if relevant expertise and capacity could be accessed from other Council services, for example Adult services; and
- develop action plans to deliver Outcomes 1 and 2, with a key focus on early intervention and prevention.

The implementation of the Council's Children's Services transformation programme has identified the need to develop transformation skills further across the Council

29 We reviewed whether the Council is effectively learning from delivering its Children's Services transformation.

30 In reaching this conclusion we identified the following key areas for development:

Areas for development

- understand and assess the need to develop capacity and transformation skills across the Council;
- assess the capacity of staff to engage with Task and Finish groups whilst carrying their usual workload;
- ensure that transformation boards balance the strategic and operational oversight and leadership work required to successfully deliver the transformation; and
- seek learning from other Welsh councils, beyond Gwent.

Staff and partners generally feel fully engaged with the Council's Children's Services transformation programme

31 We reviewed whether staff and partners feel fully engaged with the Children's Services transformation process and if can they effectively contribute.

32 In reaching this conclusion we identified the following key assurance and areas for development:

Assurances

- positive efforts to engage internal staff in the process;
- demonstrable energy and commitment from MASSH staff;
- positive feedback from Police on engagement and ability to contribute;
- corporate finance team felt very engaged in the process and have constructive yet challenging conversations with relevant officers;
- generally staff feel supported through the process; and
- staff working in a transformed service were overall more positive than the staff in a service that is just starting the transformation process.

Areas for development

- build greater understanding of the scale and complexity of the transformation programme and how individual roles contribute to the transformation programme;
- engagement of all relevant partners;
- improve communication both vertically and horizontally so there is a strong message from transformation leads on what is happening, why and when; and
- consider how increased agile/flexible working may impact on the delivery of other transformation projects.

The Council may need to address a range of risks as it continues to deliver its transformation programmes

- 33 During the course of the review, we identified a number of strategic risks that the Council will need to consider as it further implements the children's services transformation. These risks may also be applicable to other transformation programmes that the Council may implement:
- Scale of the outcomes that are being expected within the timescales
 - Having the right capacity and strategic leadership for the programme
 - Having the right capacity and skills to deliver the projects
 - Resourcing the transformation within the Council's financial position
 - Developing the wider support system so that when MASSH does not accept a referral there is a wider support system to help families
 - Delivering effective corporate parenting
 - Engaging health partners at the right level to support the outcomes potential to link to the Regional Partnership Board
 - Ensuring consistent staff engagement and commitment throughout the process

Part Two: The Council's Response

- 34 We agreed the assurances and areas for development in this report with the Council. In late March 2021 we presented these findings to the Council's Senior Leadership Team and Cabinet. At that workshop the Council began to consider its response to our findings.
- 35 During summer 2021 following the appointment of the new Chief Executive, the Council decided to develop a new five-year Children's services strategy that aims to address the review findings.
- 36 The Council expects to publish its new strategy in early 2022.



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