



First year reflections from the Independent Scrutineer

‘As I come up to my first year as Independent Scrutineer for the Solihull Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) I thought it both appropriate and timely to offer some reflections on the last year.

My role as the Independent Scrutineer is to support, challenge and hold to account Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, West Midlands Police, and Birmingham and Solihull Clinical Commissioning Group for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people in Solihull.

I also recognise the important role that other partners including the Probation Service and Education play in protecting children and young people from harm.

The last year has been an extraordinary and particularly challenging year for the partnership.

We have faced the continuing challenge of dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic.

The partnership has also attracted significant national scrutiny and attention as a result of the tragic murder of Arthur Labinjo Hughes in June 2020. I share the devastation felt by all professionals following his traumatic death.

In January 2022 the partnership was subject to a robust and challenging Joint Thematic Agency Inspection (JTAI) of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The findings were sobering with the Inspectors finding “there was not sufficient social work capacity in the MASH to deal effectively with presenting need”. The Inspectors also found the number of health and police resources in the MASH was insufficient fuelling “drift and delay” in decision making to reduce risk to children. A key finding was that the partnership had not been sufficiently sighted on the experiences of children being referred into the MASH for help and support.

It is important to acknowledge that the Inspectors also found “the current MASH workforce is committed and knowledgeable and dedicated to meeting the needs of children” which reflects what I have observed as Independent Scrutineer.

In December 2021 it was also announced that a national review would take place examining the events that led up to Arthur’s murder and the local child safeguarding practice review which had been commissioned by the LSCP was suspended. The findings of the national review are due to be published at the end of May 2022.

The Solihull Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) is absolutely committed to taking the learning from the JTAI Inspection and the imminent national review to drive improvements in safeguarding children and young people.

There has been an extraordinary amount of improvement activity carried out since the turn of the year, including:

- An uplift in resources from all agencies in the MASH
- An uplift in resources within the LSCP Business Unit
- Increased financial investment from the three safeguarding partners to support the partnership arrangements
- Strengthened leadership across Children's Social Care
- The Executive Group is now meeting monthly and an Improvement Board is in place.
- Governance arrangements have been further strengthened with the introduction of a Strategic Leads Group, MASH Strategic and Operational Groups and a Learning and Development Group.
- The introduction of a Practitioner Forum and an ongoing commitment to professional development.

Although there is some way to go, we are seeing some promising signs with enhanced multi-agency working resulting in a reduction in backlogs and increased consistency in approach.

Without been complacent, it is encouraging to hear first-hand from professionals that they have felt more supported and in a better position to support children and young people over recent weeks.

There can be nothing more important than protecting our most vulnerable. As Nelson Mandela said: *"The true character of a society is revealed in how it treats its children"*.

Despite the challenges, I have witnessed first-hand the dedication, commitment, and resilience of professionals from a range of agencies who do an extraordinary job every day in the face of high levels of scrutiny and accountability.

We have a lot to build upon, but a lot to do. Every day, we have the privilege and the challenge to make a difference to people's lives.

As I embark on my second year, I know we have a shared commitment to do everything we can do to keep children and young people in Solihull safe.

My appreciation and thanks go to each and every one of you.'

Stephen Cullen
Independent Scrutineer