

Annual report on the effectiveness of safeguarding children by Southend Council's children's social care services

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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council with information in order to give assurance about the functioning and effectiveness of the safeguarding of children and young people by children's social care.
- 1.2 To support members to discharge their safeguarding duties in relation children and young people.
- 1.3 This report should be read alongside the annual report of the LSCB.

2. Recommendation

- 2.2 That the report is noted and that the priority areas for improvement in 2014/15, as detailed in section 12, are agreed.

3. Background

- 3.1 Children's social care service is the lead service area responsible for discharging the council's duties to assess need and to protect children assessed to be at risk of suffering, or suffering, significant harm. This duty is discharged in partnership with all Departments within the Council and partner agencies such as health, education, police, probation services and the third sector.
- 3.2 Our statutory duties are contained within the Children Act 1989, subsequent legislation such as the Children Act 2004 and Working Together 2013 guidance.
- 3.3 The service receives approximately 1900 referrals a year and as at 31st October 2013 there were 108 open child protection cases and 637 Children in Need including 187 children allocated to the children with disabilities team. In addition there were 255 looked after children.
- 3.4 Case holding Health and Care Professional Council (HCPC) registered children's social workers, across 7 teams, are the lead professionals for children in need, children in need of protection, children in care and care leavers from 20 weeks gestation to 25 years of age.
- 3.5 The activity and performance in relation to Looked After Children was reported to Cabinet in September 2013 in the Corporate Parenting Annual Report.

4. Performance

- 4.1 Performance continues to be good.
- 4.2 The service has developed a suite of performance information which is monitored by managers across the service including the Departmental Management Team. Key safeguarding indicators are also monitored by the Corporate Management Team and People's Scrutiny Committee. In addition to this safeguarding performance is regularly reported to our strategic partnerships groups, the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and Success for All Children Group
- 4.3 One example of our sophisticated use of performance data is that the children's services management team identified the comparative low numbers of children subject to child protection plans. Detailed work, together with the LSCB audit, identified that thresholds were understood, decisions on referrals were appropriate and children subject to plans were not drifting and were coming off plans more swiftly than in comparative authorities. It was also identified that repeat plans were few. As a result we were able to be assured that child protection processes were secure despite the lower numbers. In fact this reduction was temporary and numbers have risen now nearer to target.
- 4.4 We proactively use our performance data to benchmark against our statistical neighbours, eastern region local authorities and the national average. Our comparative performance continues to be at or above the regional and national average

5. Quality Assurance

- 5.1 Quality assurance within children's social care is an area of strength. A revised quality assurance framework has been used since April 2013. It includes all managers, from team manager to Head of Service, undertaking monthly case file audits and a group of external auditors also completing audits. The external auditors are highly skilled and experienced social work practitioners many of whom have held senior positions within local authorities. Audit activity has expanded to include auditing of fostering and adoption, supervised contact and work undertaken at the Marigold Family Resource Centre.
- 5.2 The audit outcomes are reviewed monthly by the Head of Service and Group Managers and reported quarterly to the Departmental Management Team. Since the framework has been in place 25% of all open children's cases within social care have been audited. The findings of the external auditors correlate with those of internal auditors which gives assurance that we know ourselves well.
- 5.3 Audit activity enables us to identify areas of challenge and take action to make improvements. During the spring and early summer audit activity identified that some processes, relating to the recording of referrals and assessments, had changed within one part of the service which led to a reduction in performance. Swift action was then taken to reinstate the correct processes which have led to improved performance.
- 5.4 Multi-agency additional quality assurance activity is undertaken by the LSCB with our partner agencies. These are detailed in the LSCB annual report.

6. Summary of strengths and challenge

6.1 Based on performance monitoring and quality assurance the table below details our identified strengths and areas for improvement.

Strengths	Areas for improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thresholds are well understood and consistently applied• Duration children are subject to child protection plans• Low levels of children becoming subject to a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time• Conversion rate of referral to assessment• Management decisions on referrals• Appropriate escalation and de-escalation using the staged model of intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consistency in the quality of assessments and completion of assessments to timescale• Consistent recording of statutory visits to children in line with their child protection plan• Consistent recording of child protection core group meetings• Clearer child in need planning• Sharing of reports with families in good time for meetings• Supervision records demonstrating the social worker and manager analysis that informs planning for children

7. Voice of the child

7.1 Children's social care actively work to ensure children and young people are able to influence service delivery both in relation to their individual case and overarching themes. This work is conducted through a number of methods.

7.2 File audits assess the extent to which the child's views have been sought and acted upon. Audits tell us that the views of children are routinely used within assessment although there is some variability in the quality of the recording of this.

7.3 A recent innovation is that a selection of children is sent questionnaires about their social workers twice a year. The responses are incorporated into social workers performance reviews and the overarching themes are pulled into a report which is shared with the service and with individual workers.

7.4 The strong areas coming through this feedback is that children and young people feel their social worker takes them seriously, they can get hold of their worker and see them alone and that their social worker was good at explaining things. Some children and young people said they would like to see their social worker being better at keeping to agreed appointments and being on time

7.5 Work is continuing to support more young people to attend their Child Protection Conferences and Child in Need meetings.

8. Workforce

- 8.1 Recruitment and retention of experienced social workers is a challenge being experienced nationally.
- 8.2 We currently have a small number of vacancies which are being recruited to within children's social care. We currently have 10 posts filled by appropriate agency social workers in Children's Services. This equates to 8% of the social worker establishment. Whilst this is higher than we would wish, it compares very well regionally and nationally.
- 8.3 Over the past year recruitment activity has included developing a presence within the sector's leading publication, speaking at national conferences, a DVD for recruitment activity and regular recruitment campaigns.
- 8.4 We continue to sponsor existing staff to complete the required degree in social work. Three workers qualified as social workers in January 2013 and another three will be qualifying January 2014.
- 8.5 Supporting and developing skilled practitioners is an area of strength. It is underpinned by the '*Workforce for Excellence*' strategy. The impact of training is assessed by practitioners and their line managers 3 months and 6 months after the training has taken place. This enables us to refine and amend the training on offer for maximum impact.
- 8.6 Feedback from practitioners highlights how well supported they feel and that managers at all levels are accessible to them.
- 8.7 The most recent audit of supervision evidenced that supervision is taking place with appropriate levels of frequency; however the recording of supervision does not consistently capture the quality of the discussion.
- 8.8 Whilst we recognise the benefit of recruiting externally to bring new ideas and skills into Council, it is also good for staff to see they can progress in Southend. Our investment in our staff is assisting succession planning and internal promotions, following competitive interviews, have been made to Senior Practitioner, Team Manager and Service Manager and Group Manager posts during the last year.

9. Local Authority Designated Officer

- 9.1 The Local Authority Designated Officer, LADO, is a statutory position within each local authority. The LADO manages allegations made against adults working or volunteering with children. The threshold for intervention was amended in Working Together 2013 and the criteria now includes adults who 'behave towards a child or children in a way that indicates he or she would pose a risk to children' replacing the criteria 'behaved towards a child in a way which indicates that s/he is unsuitable to work with children.'
- 9.2 In 2012/13 45 allegations were made requiring 96 management planning meetings and 3 formal consultations. This is a reduction of 12 allegations from 2011/12. It is unclear whether there is any significance in the reduction in allegations and this is monitored by CSMT and the LSCB.

- 9.3 The majority of referrals were made by children's social care followed by the police and then education. The allegations were made against adults in a number of settings including education, foster care, transport and leisure. The largest number of referrals related to physical abuse (16) followed by sexual abuse (13)
- 9.4 15 of the allegations were substantiated and 22 were unsubstantiated in that there was insufficient evidence to prove or disprove. Only 5 allegations were disproved.
- 9.5 Oversight of the role of the LADO by Children's Services Management Team and the LSCB evidences the timeliness of the completion of the investigations with 67% concluding within 1 month and 93% within 3 months. It is of note that delays in concluding investigations are due to the complexity of the cases and on-going police investigations.
- 9.6 The work of the LADO is reported twice a year to the Department Management Team.

10. National and Local issues

10.1 Inspection Framework

10.1.1 The new Ofsted Inspection Framework for inspections of services for children in need of help and protection, children and care leavers was published on 7th November 2013 and is now in place. All local authorities will be inspected under the framework within a three year period. Inspections will take place with 24 hours' notice and will involve a team of least 7 HMI who will be on site for 11 working days.

10.1.2 Grading judgements will be made in the following areas:

- Protecting children
- Looked after children and achieving permanence
- Leadership, Management and Governance
- Adoption
- Care Leavers
- A review of the LSCB

10.1.3 We have an inspection planning group which meets regularly and is chaired by the Head of Children's Services. This group is undertaking an updated self assessment against the new inspection framework and has developed an inspection readiness plan.

10.2 Domestic Abuse

10.2.1 Domestic abuse continues to be a priority for the Council and the LSCB.

10.2.2 Children's social care is working in partnership with the police to better assess risk and safety plan when either agency becomes aware that domestic abuse is a present within a family. Since September 2013 we have operated a Joint Domestic Abuse Triage Team (JDAAT) and a police Domestic Abuse Safety Officer has been based within the First Contact Team. She is able to provide additional intelligence on cases which supports social care to make better informed decisions about intervention.

- 10.2.3 Discussions have taken place with police, probation services, public health, and Safer Places with a view to extending the JDAAT to include multiple agencies and other work areas. This arrangement will afford improved safeguarding for children and young people.
- 10.2.4 The JDAAT arrangements will be further progressed as soon as we have completed the review of the information sharing arrangements that need to be in place to support such multi-agency work.
- 10.2.5 An audit of the timeliness of decision making upon receipt of domestic abuse notifications was completed in October 2013 and showed that 80% of notifications were overseen by a manager within 24 hours of receipt.
- 10.2.6 The JDAAT has addressed the concern from the LSCB multi-agency audit relating to delays in receiving domestic abuse notifications and the quality of information contained within the notifications.

10.3 Child Sexual Exploitation and Missing Children

- 10.3.1 A greater emphasis has been put on the understanding of and responding to Child sexual exploitation (CSE) over the last year. The Group Manager for Quality Assurance attends the Southend Essex and Thurrock Strategic Group for CSE which develops the overall plan for CSE across the area and monitors its implementation. The Child Protection and Safeguarding Coordinator chairs the Local Safeguarding Children's Board CSE and Missing Group which implements the Strategic plan in Southend.
- 10.3.2 The Group Manager monitors local implementation of the plan which demonstrates better progress in Southend than in Thurrock and Essex. 380 CSE champions have been trained in Southend. They will act as the main point of contact in their agency where a member of staff holds concerns about a young person which may indicate that CSE is a concern. In addition the LSCB has offered e-learning to 419 people working with children including practitioners from children's social care and IYSS. In addition these practitioners will be offered additional specialist training during November and December 2013.
- 10.3.3 Over the last year there has been one significant CSE case, Operation Dartford, which resulted in learning for social care and the police, in particular the need to link to the complex and organised abuse procedures and improved effective early information sharing. Criminal cases are on-going in relation to the perpetrators of the abuse and the young women involved have individual safety plans.
- 10.3.4 Children who go missing have a return home interview conducted by either their allocated social worker or a Streets Ahead worker. The interview format is being developed so that it will better support the capturing of soft intelligence that can be analysed to identify areas in the town or particular groups of children that may be of concern. This is a priority area for development.

11. Challenges to the service

- 11.1 The recruitment and retention of experienced social workers continues to be a risk however it is mitigated by the use of appropriate agency staff and close supervision of less experienced staff.
- 11.2 Changes in Senior Management, including a long serving senior manager moving on was identified as a risk This was mitigated by the transfer of an existing experienced Head of Service into the role and the experience at Group Manager and Team Manager level.
- 11.3 The age profile of team managers and reviewing officers where 50% are over 50 requires robust succession planning. This is assisted by our comprehensive workforce strategy.
- 11.4 The restructuring in other agencies, particularly Health, may lead to the loss of expertise and local networks. This is mitigated through the LSCB relationships.
- 11.5 Changes in the inspection framework will make it very challenging to retain an overall external assessment of good.

12. Overall summary

- 12.1 Performance in the service continues to be strong and, supported by the robustness of the LSCB, we continue to deliver an effective safeguarding service. There are many areas of strength and these have been highlighted through the report. In particular we should note our strong, committed and skilled social work staff group.
- 12.2 Our robust quality assurance framework ensures that areas for improvement are quickly identified so that action can be put in place. The priority areas for improvement for 2014 are summarised in the table below

Priority Improvement	Action
Consistency in the quality of assessments	Regular auditing of cases and feedback to staff and managers Ongoing training programme for social workers Increased evaluation of assessment quality in supervision
Consistent and timely recording in particular recording of statutory visits to children in line with child protection plans and consistent recording of child protection Core Group meetings	A new recording policy is being developed for January 2014 which will set clear expectations for the timeliness of recording All social workers will be trained on the new policy Audits for the next year will focus on recording timeliness

	Temporary additional administrative capacity to support practitioners in setting up and minuting core group meetings and imputing these to the electronic record.
Child in need planning	Temporary additional practice manager capacity will be put in place to chair and record in detail an updated child in need planning meeting on each case to ensure every child has an up to date, clear and focused plan.
Timescales for social work assessments	This will be reinforced by managers and regular audits to ensure improved compliance with timescales and recording the dates assessments are completed
Sharing of reports with families	Managers will ensure that each worker clearly identifies in the case planning the date that the report must be shared in advance of a meeting. Compliance will be monitored through audit.
Supervision records demonstrating the breadth of discussion	Service Managers to ensure the supervision policy is complied with, to reformat the supervision record to prompt this, to ensure team managers receive sufficient supervision training and to regularly audit the quality of supervision.
Development of the JDAAT	To get a final legally approved Information Sharing Arrangement to support the inclusion of partner agencies which is currently being planned.
Missing children and Child Sexual Exploitation	To improve the recording of return home interviews to better capture the soft intelligence from young people To identify capacity to develop an analysis tool to gather trend and geographic information across the town in order to best target awareness raising, professional training and deployment of resources to specific areas or groups of young people.
Recruitment of experienced staff and managers	Continue to implement the workforce strategy Undertake a full review of recruitment and retention allowances to ensure we remain competitive

