

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 to children and young people
- 1.3 This report should be read alongside the annual report of the Local Safeguarding Children Board

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the report is noted and the priority areas for improvement for 2018/19, as detailed in the Children's Service Improvement Plan, Appendix 1, are noted.

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. The three statutory children's safeguarding agencies are the Local Authority, the Police and Health.
- 3.2 Our statutory duties are contained within the Children Act 1989, subsequent legislation and statutory guidance such as the Children Act 2004 and Working Together 2015. It should be noted that Working Together is in the process of being revised. The consultation period ended on 31st December 2017. We have submitted our views on the proposed changes, to be contained within Working Together 2018, following a report to the Executive Departmental Management Team (People).
- 3.3 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 12 weeks gestation to 18 years of age or 25 years of age for care leavers attending University or who are disabled. In addition children with

additional needs, needs which cannot be met solely by universal service provision, are supported by early help family support services, placement and resources service, youth offending service and the quality assurance service.

- 3.4 In April 2016 Ofsted, the regulatory body for children's social care, undertook an inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, looked after children and care leavers.
- 3.5 The outcome of the inspection was that children's services in Southend required improvement to be good. The services for children looked after and children in need of help and protection and management, leadership and governance all require improvement to be good. The performance of adoption services and the experiences of care leavers were both judged to be good by Ofsted.
- 3.6 The regulatory framework for the inspection of children's services has changed and the new inspection framework will begin in April 2018. We do not anticipate that we will be inspected until the autumn of 2018 at the earliest however our focus on improving services, and the experience of children and families in Southend, remains a priority regardless of when we are next subject to regulatory inspection.
- 3.7 Significant amounts of review, planning and activity has continued in response to the outcome of the inspection and the finding of two peer reviews of children's services which were undertaken during 2017.
- 3.8 This report will outline key safeguarding activity but will not replicate the detailed information which is contained within Children's Services Improvement Plan nor that which is reported to the Children's Services Improvement Board.
- 3.9 The activity and performance in relation to Looked after Children is reported in a separate suite of reports to Cabinet. Namely the Corporate Parenting Annual Report and reports relating to the regulated fostering and adoption services. These reports include information relating to safeguarding such as the quality of placements for looked after children and looked after children missing from care.

4. Performance

- 4.1 Performance continues to be regularly and robustly monitored. Team, service and group managers have access to 'live' performance data for their service areas. Children's Services Departmental Management Team (CSDMT) review performance at a monthly meeting supported by managers from the data and performance service.
- 4.2 Following feedback from the peer review undertaken by LB Westminster in September 2017 we have assured ourselves that our newly appointed team managers are able to access the performance data they require.

- 4.3 Performance is reported to EDMT on a monthly basis with particular focus on areas where performance has dropped below target or has not yet reached target.
- 4.4 The Children's Services Improvement Board, which is chaired by the Chief Executive and includes the Leader of the Council, Executive Member for Children and Learning and shadow portfolio holder as members, receive progress reports including performance measures. The Board meets bi-monthly.
- 4.5 The lead member for Children and Learning will continue to meet regularly with the Director of Children's Services to review performance and any identify safeguarding concerns.
- 4.6 In October 2017 we changed from one case management system, Care First, to another, Liquid Logic. This means that at the time of the writing of this report it takes longer to verify the performance data we have. This is due to the impact of a period of time where different case management systems have been used. We have a number of control measures in place which means that, despite this, we are able to access live data on children's cases and are therefore able to meet the safeguarding needs of individual children.
- 4.7 During 2017 we have seen improvement in performance in relation to statutory visits to looked after children and children subject to child protection plans. Visits to children subject to child protection plans stood at 96.2% in mid-November and for Looked After Children at 86.9% at the end of October 2017 (validated data). We have not yet met our target however this is an area of significant and sustained progress.
- 4.8 We have seen an upward trend for another area of focus; the timeliness of child protection investigations. We remain below target however we had seen an improvement of 35.7% in the twelve months to September 2017.
- 4.9 We have also seen improvements in the proportion of decisions made in relation to new referrals within 24 hours of the referral being received following further revisions to the process and changes in management oversight.

5. Quality Assurance

- 5.1 The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) is currently being revised to incorporate learning from the peer review undertaken by LB Westminster. The revised quality assurance framework will support improved practice within Children's Services. The framework incorporates audits of the files of foster carers, adoptive parents, supervised contact and assessments undertaken at the Marigold Family Resource Centre.

- 5.2 The revised framework will include greater opportunities for case holding practitioners to engage in case audit activity. This will support the dissemination of learning throughout the service.
- 5.3 During 2017 we have increased both the level and speed of manager response when practice within a case audit identifies that it is not to a good standard. This gives assurance that the audit activity has a direct impact on, and benefit to, the experience of children.
- 5.4 Case audit activity enables us to identify areas of challenge and take action to make improvements. Improvements have been seen in relation to child in need cases, timely recording and reviewing officer activity. Planning and management oversight is stronger. Continued areas of challenge include the recording of supervision, recording the sharing of reports with parents and consistently recording statutory home visits.
- 5.5 The LSCB undertake multi-agency quality assurance activity and this is reported to the LSCB Executive and monitored by the LSCB Monitoring Sub-group. This activity is currently being reviewed.

6. Summary of areas of challenge

- 6.1 We have commissioned a review of demand across the children's system which will inform our planning during 2018. We have commissioned Research in Practice to undertake the review. Research in Practice are an organisation who have supported evidence-informed practice and social policy in children's services since 1996.
- 6.2 Activity within the service has decreased in some areas during 2017 but remains higher than in 2015 in relation to looked after children..

	31/03/2015	31/03/2016	30/09/2016	30/09/2017	% change
Number of children subject to child protection plans	184	188	209	148	-20%
Number of Looked After Children	229	258	280	278	+18%
Number of children subject to Interim Care Orders	20	41	58	42	+110%

- 6.3 The impact of the increase in numbers of children is an increase in caseload for social workers and for independent reviewing officers. This results in challenges in making improvements in practice and in performance. It should be noted that

due to changes in practice being seen in terms of demand (placement panel, edge of care team, an increase in capacity to deliver family group conferences) and investment in the service with additional staff being employed) we are beginning to see reductions in caseloads for practitioners.

- 6.4 Some of the increase in numbers of looked after children relates to changes in children's status when they are cared for by family members. Some arrangements which had been considered as private family arrangements are now considered as meaning that a child has become looked after. This remains an area of focus and the implementation of Restorative Practice will support more families to find their own solutions together, with support from the service, resulting in less children becoming looked after.
- 6.5 The significant increase in the number of children subject to interim care orders is a measure which gives an indication of the increase in applications made to the Family Court when children are experiencing significant harm in the care of their parents. The increase is replicated across Essex and Thurrock. Much of the increase is due to a change in case law relating to children accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act. The case law broadly states that Section 20 should only be used as a short term measure. The use of Section 20 is being reviewed to ensure we are complying with the recent case law. This should result in a reduction in the number of care proceedings being issued. It should be noted that we have not received criticism from the Court for issuing care proceedings unnecessarily.
- 6.6 The changes in practice in relation to safeguarding processes, which includes an increase in service manager oversight, has led to a reduction in the number of children requiring child protection plans.
- 6.7 As stated above the learning from the review of demand across the children's system which we have commissioned will inform further changes to service delivery. This will support us to meet demand while ensuring our intervention is at the right level; that we do not intervene in the lives of families unnecessarily and that when we do intervene we do so without delay.

7. Workforce

- 7.1 As reported in previous years the recruitment of experienced social workers is a challenge being experienced on a national basis.
- 7.2 We have temporarily increased the establishment within children's services to support our improvement journey. We recruited two additional posts within the service and within HR to support our workforce and recruitment activity. We continue to lead the work within the Eastern Region relating to the recruitment and retention of qualified social workers.
- 7.3 The impact of this can be seen in the reduction in the number of vacancies and the reduction in the number of agency social workers within the service. All

team managers within Fieldwork Services, the services which discharge our statutory social work services to children, are now permanent employees. The present position is that we have 2 permanent vacancies and 2 temporary vacancies. Caseloads have reduced to an average of 22.

- 7.4 It should be noted that there was a period of instability within the workforce in Fieldwork Services during Q1 and part of Q2 prior to the full impact of the additional focus and resource relating to recruitment being felt. The instability, which included a number of vacant posts, was a contributory factor to children experiencing changes in social workers and practitioners holding higher caseloads.
- 7.5 Our recruitment strategy is currently being revised. We acknowledge that this is a key element to enable us to continue to make improvements as the quality of our workforce has a direct correlation to the experience of children.
- 7.6 We successfully delivered a social work academy during 2016/17 and have taken the learning into a revised programme for 2017/18. Four social workers in the academy moved into permanently established roles in August 2017 replacing agency social workers. We have recruited 5 newly qualified practitioners to our new programme and they took up post in November 2017.
- 7.7 We are engaging in a regional 'step up to social work' programme which supports fast tracked Masters level students entering the social work profession. We are also engaging with the return to social work programme.
- 7.8 We commission training based on identified need. Need is identified from learning from case reviews and areas identified regionally and nationally. Training commissioned for 2018 has been commissioned to support the Improvement Plan. Training in relation to child sexual exploitation continues to be delivered as is core safeguarding training.
- 7.9 All permanent staff within children's services, including managers, social workers, alternatively qualified and business support staff are enrolled on Restorative Practice training which is being delivered between December 2017 and June 2018. Restorative Practice is the model of practice we are committed to in Southend and our commitment to training all staff is evidence of how significant an element of our practice it is. Senior Leaders within the Council, including the Chief Executive, members of the Corporate Management Team, the portfolio holder and lead member will be attending a half-day briefing on Restorative Practice in January 2018.
- 7.10 During both peer reviews in 2017 the review teams reported that social workers and other practitioners felt well supported by their managers and were able to access a wide variety of training and development opportunities.

- 7.11 Supervision of social workers, including the opportunity to access reflective supervision, remains a priority for Children's Services. Ofsted reported favourably on supervision within the service. The quality of supervision will continue to be measured as part of the QAF. We know that the frequency and quality of formal supervision, as opposed to the informal supervision and management oversight we see, is not yet consistently evidenced to a high standard.
- 7.12 The revised improvement plan includes an outcome which address the need to create an environment where good practice can flourish. As part of this outcome we are setting clear practice and behavioural expectations alongside ensuring practitioners and managers have the support they need to perform well.

8. Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Missing Children

- 8.1 We continue to focus on missing children and child sexual exploitation as a priority area.
- 8.2 The CSE strategy and action plan has been revised and the associated actions are monitored by the LSCB.
- 8.3 We have recruited a practice lead for CSE which supports a clear conduit between strategy, research and practice on the ground. The post holder supports practitioners and also reviews the intelligence held by children's services and partner agencies to ensure we focus the resources of the partnership where they are most needed.
- 8.4 There is currently one significant operations relating to CSE. The strategic oversight of the operation is undertaken by a multi-agency board of senior managers chaired by the Director of Children's Services.
- 8.5 The operational management of the work of partners, with the primary focus being the welfare and safety of children, is overseen by a group chaired by the Group Manager for Early Help, Family Support and YOS. We have recruited an additional experienced qualified social worker to be the lead practitioner for the group of young women who have been identified as part of this operation.

9. Radicalisation and Extremism

- 9.1 The implementation of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 on 1 July placed a duty on local authorities and other public bodies to have "due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism", as part of the Prevent Duty.

- 9.2 Southend's Channel panel continues to meet to review cases, of both adults and children, where there has been an assessment that a person is at risk of being drawn into terrorism.
- 9.3 If safeguarding concerns are identified the usual statutory processes are undertaken by children's social care.
- 9.4 During 2017 there have been very few children referred to the Channel panel.
- 9.5 It should be noted that the Government has proposed that the lead agency to manage the Prevent programme should change from being the Police to being the Local Authority. Due to the small numbers of adults and children referred in Southend, and in greater Essex as a whole. It is likely that Southend, Essex and Thurrock will join together to plan discharge this duty across the region when the changes come into force. There is currently no indication from the Government of the timescale for the changes to be made nor specific details of what the changes will be.

10. Overall summary

- 10.1 The Children's Services Improvement Plan will continue to be the vehicle to improve services for children in need of help and protection. We have revised the improvement plan and now focus our activity on six overarching outcomes.
- 10.2 The revised Improvement Plan uses a model of outcome based accountability (OBA) to drive impactful and sustainable improvement.
- 10.3 The Improvement Board and Children's Scrutiny Panel will each meet 6 times a year. There will therefore be oversight and scrutiny each month and this will result in any delay in meeting targets and actions being challenged in a timely manner.
- 10.4 The improvements will supported by a number of other strategies within the service including the Child Sexual Exploitation Strategy, Recruitment Strategy and Sufficiency Strategy (recruitment of carers for looked after children).