

## **Annual report on the effectiveness of safeguarding children by Southend Council's Children's Social Care Services**

Prepared by John O'Loughlin, Director of Children's Services and Ruth Baker, Group Manager Fieldwork

### **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 2017/18, 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 require 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. The outcome of the

inspection, and the accompanying draft improvement plan, were reported to Cabinet in September 2016.

- 3.6 Significant amounts of planning and activity has been undertaken in response to the outcome of the inspection. This report will outline key safeguarding activity but will not replicate the detailed information contained within the Cabinet report and the Children's Services Improvement Plan.
- 3.7 The activity and performance in relation to Looked after Children was reported to Cabinet in September 2016 in the Corporate Parenting Annual Report. The report included information relating to safeguarding such as the quality of placements for Looked after Children and children missing from care.

#### **4. Performance**

- 4.1 Performance continues to be good in many areas. There are some areas of particular focus which form part of the Children's Services Improvement Plan.
- 4.2 During Quarter 2 and 3 of 2016/17 focus was given to performance in relation to the recording of statutory visits and timeliness of Section 47 (child protection) enquiries. The focus on these two areas of safeguarding activity led to improved performance.
- 4.3 Some areas of performance dropped following the Ofsted inspection. This relates primarily to changes in demand. Section 6 of this report details these areas of challenge and the actions taken in response.
- 4.4 The suite of performance information has been revised to ensure that members and senior officers have the information they need to challenge services and to support improved performance. The performance information will be further developed to incorporate a balanced scorecard approach; it will include performance data, quality assurance activity, workforce data and feedback from service users.
- 4.5 Performance information will be reported to the Children's Improvement Board and Children's Scrutiny Committee. The Improvement Board is chaired by the Chief Executive and members include the Deputy Chief Executive, People, Director of Children's Services, Lead Member for Children and Learning, Shadow Portfolio Holder and an independent consultant. Although there is no statutory requirement to have an Improvement Board or Children's Scrutiny Committee they have been created them to support improvement within Children's Services.
- 4.6 The lead member for Children and Learning will continue to meet regularly with the Director of Children's Services to review performance data.
- 4.7 Within Children's Services performance information is used within a variety of forums: Children's Services Management Team, Fieldwork Services Management Team and at team level diagnostics. Key safeguarding indicators are also monitored by the Corporate Management Team. In addition safeguarding performance is regularly reported to our strategic partnership groups: the Local Safeguarding Children's Board, the Corporate Parenting Group and Success for All Children Group.

#### **5. Quality Assurance**

- 5.1 The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) was revised in the autumn of 2016 as part of the Improvement Plan. 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 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.
- 5.3 The revised QAF starts from a number of key principles and assumptions:
- Southend Children’s Services are committed to delivering the very best outcomes for the children it works with;
  - Ultimately, the delivery of good outcomes will always take precedence over a focus on process or outputs but all are important in the delivery of children’s social care services;
  - Outcomes for vulnerable children can always be improved upon and no service ever performs perfectly - social care services require a constantly questioning and interrogative approach to ensure their continuing safety and effectiveness;
  - Ensuring an ever-improving quality of all we do is the responsibility of all staff but the prime responsibility will always rest with those who deliver front line services to children and their families;
  - Safe and effective services depend on the existence of a healthy tension in the system between those charged with the delivery of services and those who have a scrutinising and oversight role. Managing the tension is part of the role of senior managers who need to ensure a balance is maintained between support and challenge and is always driven by the best outcomes for children.
- 5.4 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 detailed in the LSCB annual report.

## 6. Summary of areas of challenge

- 6.1 Activity within the service has increased during 2016 as detailed below;

	31/03/2015	31/03/2016	30/09/2016	% change
Number of children subject to child protection plans	184	188	209	+13%
Number of Looked After Children	229	258	280	+22%
Number of children subject to Interim Care Orders	20	41	58	+190%

- 6.2 The increase in activity can be seen nationally. Some of the reasons for the increase in Southend are reported below. 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.

- 6.3 Additional temporary resource has been agreed to support the Improvement Plan. The resource includes additional social workers, management capacity and reviewing officer capacity. This will address some of the impact of the increase in activity.
- 6.4 When the numbers of children within the service increase it increases the length of time that children remain open to the service. This is due to the fact there is less capacity to drive forward plans for families. This in turn can lead to numbers increasing further. As detailed in point 6.3 the additional temporary resources identified will enable plans for families to be progressed and will reduce delay.
- 6.5 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. Work is being undertaken to review our practice in relation to these arrangements to ensure children are able to reside in family arrangements with limited local authority involvement when this appropriate and safe. This work will result in changes in practice during 2017/18 and should reduce the numbers of children looked after.
- 6.6 A second area which has led to an increase in activity is a rise in the number of older children, children aged 14 and over, who become looked after. Often these children need to be brought into the care of the local authority due to abuse and neglect. There is however a group of older young people who may be able to remain living with their family if a package of intensive support is available. In November 2016 the newly created 'Edge of Care' team began delivering this type of intensive support and it is anticipated that their work will reduce the number of older young people who need to become looked after.
- 6.7 A placement panel, chaired by the Director of Children's Services, considers all requests from Fieldwork Services for older children to become Looked After. This will facilitate additional support being identified for families to prevent children needing to become looked after.
- 6.8 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.
- 6.9 The increase in children subject to child protection plans is due in the main to children needing to be subject to child protection plans. Alongside this increased need within the community is a change in practice for children who are in the pre-proceedings

phase of public family law. The threshold for entering the pre-proceedings phase of family law aligns with the threshold for child protection plans and we have therefore seen an increase in the number of plans.

- 6.10 The Improvement Plan includes a number of actions which will address the increase in activity while improving the experience of children and families. One key element of the plan is the model of practice which is under development. This model will reduce activity within the service over the medium to longer term as it will build resilience within communities, reduce the need for statutory intervention by using models such as family group conferencing and family based meetings and will focus on relationship based and restorative practice.

## **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 cases and overarching themes. We are able to capture this work through a number of methods.
- 7.2 Audit activity shows the views of children and young people is an area of strength in case work conducted by social workers.
- 7.3 We have seconded an experienced children's social worker to a participant lead role for a 6 month period. This has increased the reach of our participation work to include children in need and children in need of protection to a more meaningful level than previously possible.
- 7.4 A Young Experts Group (YEGS) was developed during the autumn of 2016. The YEGS have taken on the role of Principle Social Worker on Children's Commissioner Take over Day, have taken part in consultation on the model of practice for children's services, are supporting improvements in practice relating to the long term linking of children to foster carers and have taken part in regional events for young people.
- 7.5 The strong areas coming through the feedback is that children and young people continue to feel that their social worker takes them seriously, they can get hold of them and that they see them alone. Children and young people have continued to report they would like to see their social worker being better at keeping to agreed appointments and being on time. They have also said they would like to do fun activities, such as basketball, with their social workers rather than talking to them at home.
- 7.6 Feedback from young people about their Independent Reviewing Officers is reported in the annual report of the Principal Reviewing Officer.
- 7.7 Work continues to support more young people to attend, where appropriate, their Child in Need meetings and Child Protection Conferences. We are contributing to work being undertaken across the Eastern Region in relation to this as engaging young people in Child Protection Conferences is a regionally acknowledged area of challenge. Some young people have chaired their Looked after Child statutory reviews during the year.

## **8. Workforce**

- 8.1 As reported in 2013, 2014 and 2015; the recruitment of experienced social workers is a challenge being experienced on a national basis.
- 8.2 The number of agency social worker employed within the service has increased slightly from 2015. We have 16 vacancies within the substantive establishment covered by agency social workers compared to 13 in 2015. This includes agency social workers who are temporarily covering some of the additional staffing resource agreed as part of the improvement plan. This is higher than we would wish however it compares well both regionally and nationally. Our position is significantly better than the other unitary authorities within the Eastern Region.
- 8.3 It continues to be the case that it is the front line social work teams, First Contact and Care Management, that are the most difficult to recruit to. This is due to the nature and demands of the work.
- 8.4 A Recruitment Strategy was developed during 2015/16 and covers a 3 year period. The strategy comprises of 3 elements; a social work academy for newly qualified social workers, exploration of engagement in fast track programmes for students such as the Frontline or Step Up national programmes and requiring experienced social workers not working in front line parts of Children's Services to spend time practicing in front line teams.
- 8.5 Funding was agreed for the social work academy and 5 newly qualified social workers have been recruited. They will take up posts within front line teams in August 2017 replacing agency social workers.
- 8.6 Exploration of engaging in fast track programmes is on course with a view to recruiting students to take up places in September 2017.
- 8.7 The strategy to require all experienced social workers to spend time practising in front line teams has not been finalised. It will be taken forward during 2017.
- 8.8 We commission training based on identified need. Need is identified from learning from case reviews and areas identified regionally and nationally. Training commissioned for 2017 has been commissioned to support the Improvement Plan. Training in relation to child sexual exploitation continues to be delivered as is core safeguarding training.
- 8.9 The Ofsted inspection team reported that social workers felt well supported by their managers and were able to access a wide variety of training and development opportunities.
- 8.10 The increase in demand on the service, detailed in Section 6, has increased the workload of social workers. The actions detailed in Section 6 in relation to the increased demand are expected to result in reduction in the workload of social workers. This will reduce the amount of time social workers spend working above their core hours.
- 8.11 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.

## **9. Domestic Abuse**

- 9.1 Domestic Abuse continues to be a priority for the Council and the LSCB.
- 9.2 The Multi-agency Risk Assessment Team (MARAT) has been operation since June 2016. The team shares information and safety plans for victims of high risk domestic abuse incidents within 3 days of the incident being referred. The team comprises of representatives from adult and children's social work, early help and family support, Essex Police, health services, Safer Places and the Community Rehabilitation Company.
- 9.3 MARAT was developed in response to the concerns about the delays in multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) being held. The partnership aim was for a MARAC to be held within 14 working days of the high risk domestic abuse incident being referred to the team. The practice before the MARAT was operation was that it could take up to 12 weeks for the MARAC to be held and a multi-agency safety plan put in place for victims.
- 9.4 The Deputy Chief Executive, People, chairs the MARAT project board which has overseen the development and delivery of the MARAT.
- 9.5 A Review of the first 3 months of the operation of the MARAT was completed during October 2016. The review identified that the MARAT is working in practice to achieve the outcomes set by the partnership.
- 9.6 During September 2016 80% of high risk incidents were discussed within 14 working days, 6% within 15 working days, 3% within 17 working days and 11% within 18 working days.
- 9.7 A common theme of feedback during the review was that there is strength in the multi-agency working and collaborative approach between the partner agencies.
- 9.8 Families with children who have experienced domestic abuse assessed by Police as medium risk but do not meet the threshold for statutory social work intervention are offered the opportunity to engage with Early Help and Family Support Services. This innovative approach will reduce the impact of domestic abuse in Southend.
- 9.9 A further review will be undertaken during 2017 jointly between Southend, Essex and Thurrock.

## **10. Child Sexual Exploitation and Missing Children**

- 10.1 Increased focus has been given to service delivery for missing children and children at risk of, or being, sexually exploited over the last 2 years and it remains a priority for the Department and the LSCB.

- 10.2 The CSE strategy and action plan has been revised and the associated actions are monitored by the LSCB. The revision of the action plan forms part of the Improvement Plan.
- 10.3 Ofsted reported favourably on the work undertaken at a strategic level in relation to CSE and missing children.
- 10.4 The Group Manager for Quality Assurance and the Service Manager for CSE continues to attend the Southend, Essex and Thurrock Strategic Group for CSE which develops the overall plan for CSE across the area and monitors its implementation. The Group Manager also chairs the LSCB CSE and Missing Group which implements the strategic plan in Southend.
- 10.5 There have been no significant operations relating to CSE in the past year.
- 10.6 The peer review conducted by the Home Office in October examining gang activity in Southend has resulted in an action plan overseen by the Community Safety Partnership. Police activity in relation to gang activity in South Essex sits under the auspices of Operation Raptor.

## **11. Radicalisation and Extremism**

- 11.1 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.
- 11.2 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.
- 11.3 If safeguarding concerns are identified the usual statutory processes are undertaken by children’s social care.
- 11.4 There was one case involving a child during the year where action was taken to prevent a person being drawn into terrorism.

## **12. Overall summary**

- 12.1 The Children’s Services Improvement Plan will be the vehicle to improve services for children in need of help and protection. All actions within the plan have milestones which have clear timescales for delivery. This will support the Improvement Board and Children’s Scrutiny Panel to ensure progress is made swiftly against actions.
- 12.2 The Improvement Plan prioritises actions by completion date. This can be seen in the plan as Appendix 1.
- 12.3 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.



## Appendix 2

- 12.4 The revised suite of performance information will further support Members and Senior Officers to drive progress against the plan.
- 12.5 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).

Appendix 1: Children's Service Improvement Plan

Appendix 2: Children's Service Detailed Improvement Plan

Appendix 3: Recruitment Strategy.