
UPDATE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENTS

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Cyndi Hughes,
Children and Young People Portfolio**

**Responsible Director -
Suzanne Joyner, Director of Children and Adults Services**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update Cabinet of the improvements to date within Children's Services further to the Single Inspection undertaken in June 2015.

Summary

2. Cabinet on 8 December 2015 agreed to receive regular reports on progress in implementing the Children's Services Improvement Plan. This report summarises progress on improvements since the last report in December 2015 and since the publication of the Ofsted report on Services to Children in Need of Help and Protection, Children Looked After and Care Leavers on 1 September 2015.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that Members consider and scrutinise the information contained in the report and agree whether further information or explanation is required regarding any of the specific areas raised in the report.

Reasons

4. That Cabinet should receive regular updates on improvement progress.

Suzanne Joyner
Director of Children and Adults Services

Background Papers

- (i) Darlington Children's Services Improvement Plan 2015-17
- (ii) Ofsted – Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and
- (iii) Review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board

S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for Crime and disorder.
Health and Well Being	This report has the implications for the health and wellbeing of vulnerable groups of children
Carbon Impact	This report has no implications for Carbon Impact.
Diversity	This report has no implications for Diversity.
Wards Affected	All wards within the Borough of Darlington are affected.
Groups Affected	Looked After Children and Care Leavers and Children in Need of Help and Protection
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend any changes to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent matter.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	This report has no implications for One Darlington: Perfectly Placed
Efficiency	This report has no implications for Carbon Impact.

MAIN REPORT

Practice Improvement

5. The practice improvement priorities highlighted in the Improvement Plan are as follows:
 - (a) Strengthen management capacity and oversight of practice
 - (b) Put in place a robust data reporting system
 - (c) Improve timeliness and quality of assessments
 - (d) Implement monthly thematic audits of practice
 - (e) Provide training in target areas to equip staff with the necessary practice and supervisory skills to drive up the quality of practice
 - (f) Develop a recruitment and retention strategy
6. To date improvements in each of the above key areas are as follows:
 - (a) **Strengthen Management Capacity and Oversight of Practice**

Recruitment is underway for a new Assistant Director of Children's Services as agreed by Council on 28 February 2016. A leadership and management programme has been rolled out to managers within Children's Services. The focus of this programme is to enable those with supervisory responsibilities to ensure the highest professional standards and be accountable for the development and support of practitioners with sound, robust, evidence based knowledge and judgements. The leadership modules forms part of the Consolidating Good Practice training programme that is currently being delivered.

In addition to the above a series of Challenge and Accountability Sessions have been run for managers. These sessions have been facilitated by our improvement partner Red Quadrant, supported by the Head of Practice Improvement. The sessions provide the opportunity for Heads of Service, Service Managers, Team Managers and Independent Reviewing Officers to highlight and share views on driving performance improvements and how they successfully influence this irrespective of service area. Three sessions have taken place, with the final session completed in early April 2016. Sessions have been well attended and a review of the proposals and actions will take place in early May 2016.

A themed audit focusing on the quality of supervision and decision making is to be undertaken during April and May. Terms of reference include: the robustness of decision making; whether supervision provides clear direction to practitioners; risk management; reviews previous decision making; considers new information; and can evidence reflection and analysis. All managers who provide supervision to social workers have a specific number of cases audited.

In recognition of the need to strengthen management capacity and reduce workloads two additional posts have been built into the existing establishment – an Independent Reviewing Officer and an additional Team Manager.

A commissioning process is currently underway to secure an external resource to independently undertake return interviews for young people who go missing from home or from care. Operational services will continue to collate data relating to children missing and use emerging themes and findings to inform practice.

(b) Put in place robust data reporting system (against all key performance indicators with clear targets for improvement that provides managers at all levels and Members with the data needed to maintain an accurate picture of performance)

There is now an improved system of data and performance reporting on a regular basis to the Chief Executive, Director of Children and Adults Services and Senior Management Team. Performance information and data is challenged by the Chief Executive and Director of Children and Adults Services through a series of performance clinics held on a monthly and quarterly basis involving all tiers of management during the cycle. This is now programmed into Cabinet Member briefings and Children and Young People Scrutiny.

Wherever performance does not meet agreed targets a narrative and analysis provided the relevant Head of Service and their management group highlights what specific remedial actions are being put in place to support and strengthen improvement. These actions are scrutinised during the clinic and actions put in place to ensure that progress can be measured.

In addition to the performance clinic cycle, the Head of Performance is introducing weekly performance reports for the Director on key measures. These are supported by weekly reporting, determined by the Head of Safeguarding, of underpinning data and measures going to managers to ensure that all visits are timely and appropriately recorded.

Reporting includes staffing and caseloads, in order for Senior Managers to have a continued understanding of pressures within the Safeguarding Service. Service Managers within Safeguarding are clear on their responsibilities for driving practice improvement.

A new electronic case recording system for Children's Services is due to go live from October 2016. The replacement of Care First, our current electronic system, with Liquid Logic will improve data reporting processes whilst providing practitioners with an improved means of recording their work. This requires significant improvements in data quality prior to implementation, which are underway as part of the implementation and our overall performance improvement programme.

A comprehensive training programme will be rolled out over the next few months to ensure there is compliance and understanding of the new system and to reduce any possible migration difficulties that may arise.

(c) Improve Timeliness and Quality of Assessments

An improved reporting mechanism for monitoring timeliness of assessments has seen a steady increase in timeliness since the publication of the Ofsted Judgement. Daily reports are provided to Heads of Service allowing for greater scrutiny and these are reported to the director on a monthly basis giving increased management oversight.

In month performance has been at 95% for the last four months although the year end cumulative figure is likely to be considerably lower due to poor performance earlier in the year. Work on timeliness is continuing to embed and sustain change while an increased focus is placed on improving the consistency of the quality of practice.

(d) Implement Monthly Thematic Audits of Practice

A priority action from the inspection was to undertake an audit of Section 20 cases. This is complete, with the overview and findings' having been presented to the Improvement Board and a follow-up action plan is being implemented.

A monthly programme of thematic audits is now in place. The Head of Review and Development presents a quarterly summary of findings that highlights key areas for learning to the Performance Clinic and Improvement Board.

Additional Practice Improvement Activity

An additional independent audit of cases subject to S20 voluntary care arrangements have been audited in response to an Ofsted recommendation. Changes have resulted in decision making and planning processes.

In addition to the above, a targeted and focused Practice Improvement Service has been established in the short term to strengthen and provide a range of quality assurance mechanisms to enhancing scrutiny and challenge to the quality of practice. This is currently being delivered through a range of quality assurance activity including additional snapshot auditing into specific areas (eg the duration of children subject to a child in need plan and looking at the quality of visits to children subject to a child protection plan).

To assist practitioners in their understanding of good practice, a series of agreed practice standards are currently being developed to provide consistency of practice and a common understanding of expectations.

The Practice Standards are due to be rolled out in May 2016 and will form part of the induction and recruitment offer for new staff.

(e) Provide training in target areas to equip staff with the necessary practice and supervisory skills to drive up the quality of practice

The mandatory training programme for Children's social workers "Consolidating Good Practice" includes modules on the Journey / Voice of the Child, Risk Assessments, Assessments and Analysis, Planning and Interventions. This programme also incorporates training for managers on practice supervision.

The programme runs for a 12 month period and will be subject to an impact analysis to evidence how practice has been improved and to measure the effectiveness of the training provided. Impact will be cross referenced with audit findings.

(f) Develop a Recruitment and Retention Strategy

A Recruitment and Retention strategy has been agreed aimed at attracting a suitably skilled and competent workforce to Darlington Children's Services, in order to deliver high-quality services to children and their families.

A range of potential benefits including market supplements, remote working and car parking are currently being implemented that will complement the existing "Consolidating Good Practice" training programme. A benchmarking exercise has been undertaken to compare our pay scales and structure to that of other authorities in the region.

A microsite has been developed to assist in recruitment, better promoting the new recruitment materials and explaining Darlington's offer to prospective applicants. As a result, the grades and job descriptions for some key practitioner and frontline manager's roles have been reviewed and recruitment is commencing to fill these.

Other Areas to Note

7. A Getting to Good Seminar led by Ofsted was held for all Managers on 18 April 2016. The seminar focussed on the delivery of good assessments.
8. A Social Work Summit was held on 21 April 2016 for all Social Workers in Children's Services. Professor Donald Forrester (a renowned social work researcher, lecturer and academic) provided the keynote speech. The summit focussed on direct social work practice with children and families.

Embedding Performance management and Data Quality

9. A Head of Performance has been appointed to drive the short term improvements highlighted in the inspection and drive delivery of the improvement plan. An agreed performance management framework now provides clear reports at strategic and operational levels that are routinely distributed to the Senior Management Team, their direct reports and cascade to all relevant managers.

10. Monthly Performance Clinics now form regular business activity and are chaired by the Director of Children and Adults Services who applies rigorous scrutiny and challenge to key performance indicators. These are informed by similar performance clinics engaging Heads of Service, Service Managers and Team Managers.
11. A series of electronic procedures and policies have been commissioned that will come into effect within Q1 of the financial year along with further enhancements to the performance reporting and a more robust approach to target setting.

Governance and Leadership

12. Governance arrangements are being enhanced, with clear roles and responsibilities being identified for key groups and individuals. These are being brought together within a protocol to ensure clarity of responsibilities and development of efficient work programmes.
13. A schedule of reporting is now in place to ensure Members have a thorough oversight of performance. Reports on key performance indicators have recently been presented to scrutiny that included a detailed report on Initial Health Assessments. A work programme for the forthcoming months has been developed, providing updates on audit activity, recruitment and retention and specific matters relating to children looked after. These will present updates on improvements whilst highlighting areas for further challenge and scrutiny.
14. A programme of training has now been implemented for elected members to effectively discharge their statutory responsibilities. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) has rolled out a programme of workshops throughout February and April 2016. The programme, entitled "Effective Challenge for Safeguarding Children and Young People", was underpinned with a clear focus on safeguarding and scrutiny functions including the role of the LSCB and exploring multi agency partnerships. A feedback session on the impact of the training is due to take place between members and our Improvement Partner, Red Quadrant, on 24 May 2016.
15. The Director of Children and Adults Services meets on a regular basis with the Independent Chair of the Darlington Safeguarding Children's Board.
16. The LGA has provided Mentor's to work with the Lead Member and the Chair of Scrutiny as part of their development.
17. The Children's Services Improvement Board, chaired by Red Quadrant lead, meets monthly and gives oversight to progress alongside a thematic "deep dive" on key issues. Engagement from partners is proving valuable in providing challenge and support.