

Meeting:	Children and young people scrutiny committee
Meeting date:	Tuesday 1 December 2020
Title of report:	Review of performance and progress against the Safeguarding and Family Support improvement plan
Report by:	Assistant director for children's safeguarding quality and improvement

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

To review progress against the Safeguarding and Family Support division improvement plan 2020 / 2021 (appendix a) and Our priorities definitions (appendix b) produced in response to the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection judgement of June 2018 and the subsequent focused visits carried out in 2019.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- (a) The committee review progress and determine any recommendations it wishes to make to the executive to secure further improvement.**

Alternative options

1. There are no alternative options to the above recommendations; it is a function of the committee to review actions taken in connection with the discharge of any functions relating to children and young people which are the responsibility of the executive and make reports or recommendations to the executive.

Key considerations

2. The children and young people scrutiny committee received a report at the meeting on 15 September 2020 that provided an update on the progress against the overall improvement plan for Safeguarding and Family Support 2019 / 2020 that was developed to ensure that the continued focus on improvement is driven forward. This includes further actions to improve the service and moves beyond the initial actions from the 2018 Ofsted inspection. The actions from the Ofsted improvement plan have been incorporated into the individual services' plans. This is to ensure that the continued focus on improvement is driven forward and that this is embedded to take account of the cross cutting actions that all services are required to deliver against; for example, the timeliness of visits and completion of both case and personal supervision.
3. The Ofsted focused visit of January 2019 looked at the local authority's arrangements for receiving referrals about children who may be in need or at risk of significant harm, children transferring to and from Early Help services, the effectiveness of child protection enquiries and the quality of assessments and interventions for children in need of help and protection. The conclusions were that from a very low base action taken by senior leaders had improved the overall stability of the social care workforce and that this had been achieved over a relatively short period of time. Plans for improvement were appropriately focused and there was a realistic view of quality of practice which was too variable and not yet good.
4. Revised performance management and quality assurance approaches were starting to show some early impact. The pace of progress was hampered by staff turnover and difficulties in recruiting to key management posts including the lead officer for quality assurance. There continued to be strong political and corporate support for children's services.
5. On 18 and 19 December 2019 Ofsted carried out a focused visit. The focus of the visit looked at our arrangements for children in need and children subject to a child protection plan. This included elements of contextual safeguarding, particularly peer on peer abuse. The conclusion regarding work in the Child Protection/ Court area of the organisation was that little progress had been made in improving the quality of practice, including the quality of management supervision and guidance, and timely recording. A major factor impacting on the ability to bring about improvement was difficulty to recruit experienced and skilled social workers into the service.
6. Ofsted published their report and further information was provided to all councillors. There were some positive elements to the feedback received from Ofsted. No children seen were identified at risk of significant harm and all were receiving interventions. There was positive recognition of the work of the children with disabilities team, the work on contextual safeguarding, peer on peer abuse, the stabilisation of the workforce through the recruitment and retention strategy and the planned investment. However, as the council recognises, little progress has been made in improving the quality of practice for child in need and child protection and the challenge in this area is heightened by difficulties in recruitment and staff turnover. Further work to address these issues is contained in the safeguarding improvement plan that is reviewed on a quarterly basis by children and young people's scrutiny committee.
7. Ofsted were provided with our "self – evaluation" and there was recognition that we know ourselves well, that the quality assurance framework provides appropriate and in depth knowledge, that there is senior leadership commitment to the service including resourcing and further plans for development. We review and update this on a quarterly

basis (appendix c) to ensure that we continue to reflect and understand the progress we are making and the areas that require our attention.

8. Improvements continue to be made around performance information being provided to the services areas and a process has been developed to ensure that the information is received and reviewed and is being used across the division; this includes the monthly performance scorecard, (appendix d). In addition to this we have implemented a monthly meeting with team managers to review and provide appropriate challenge to continue our improvement journey.
9. The impact of COVID19 has been significant over the period. National guidance has been followed and in some areas Herefordshire has adopted a COVID19+ approach in relation to public and staff safety. Staff have contributed significantly to the response to COVID19. Visits to vulnerable children and families have continued where necessary with use of PPE and following local and national guidance. The council continues to review our approach to service delivery and staff safety and wellbeing; staff have in the main been working from home.
10. Herefordshire has continued to implement the recommendations from external high-performing Partners in Practice (PIP), from both Doncaster and Essex Councils in 2019. Using PIP support was planned to continue in 2020 to support our improvement and has the commitment from the DfE. We have taken this improvement work forward in quarter 2 in spite of the impact of COVID19 with reviews being carried out with our looked after children's; child protection; and assessment teams; this was all completed with colleagues from Essex virtually. We also have planned a further review for our MASH and Early Help hub within quarter 3.
11. Early Help has developed considerably since the introduction of Herefordshire's Early Help Assessment (EHA) which replaced the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). There are 1309 EHAs (September 2020) compared with 500 CAFs in January 2018. Families with emerging or more complex needs below the threshold of requiring statutory intervention are identified and assessed using the EHA. The assessment is of the whole family and identifies their unmet needs then an outcome focused support plan is drawn up with the family to bring about sustainable change and leave the family stronger for the future.
12. The link between Early Help and the Multiagency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) has recently been strengthened to further ensure families receive the Right Help at the Right Time by the formation of the Early Help Hub (EHH). The EHH takes all level 2 & 3 contacts, including level 3 Multiagency Referral Forms (MARFs) thereby ensuring families are offered the 'Right Support at the Right Time' and releasing MASH to spend more time on investigating threshold and level 4 cases. The EHH went live on 21 September 2020 and in the first week achieved its target of 95% of contacts to the EHH being completed in 72 hours.
13. Ofsted noted in 2018 that a significant number of contacts are signposted away from children's social care, which would indicate that too many children were being referred that did not reach threshold for intervention. There has been a change in the reporting of Contacts. Police Notifications of Domestic Abuse at levels 2 and 3 are dealt with by the Domestic Abuse Hub. 180 Police Notifications of Domestic Abuse went to the Domestic Abuse Hub. 97% were dealt with within 48 hours. Work has been undertaken with partner agencies to develop a process that effectively manages the Domestic Abuse notifications. This was enhanced during COVID-19 to respond to a possible increase in Domestic Abuse

incidents. This has now been reviewed and a new process has been agreed by partner agencies.

14. On 1 September 2020 the new process commenced. Domestic Abuse meetings take place on a daily basis with partner agencies on Domestic Abuse incidents that have been assessed at level 2 and 3 according to the Level of Need Response and Guidance Document. This is to ensure appropriate information sharing and support is provided for children and families. Level 4 domestic abuse incidents are investigated by MASH. Safelives have been consulted and further discussions are planned to consider their models and utilising their training opportunities.
15. In September, MASH received 441 contacts. 93% were dealt with within 24 hours. 16% were accepted as level 4 referrals. This is below the target of 20%. Q2 has seen consistency in contacts converting to referrals.
16. Herefordshire's Partners in Practice from Essex spent time in the Assessment Teams in September 2020. The feedback from Essex was they felt the Head of Service had a vision for the service as did some of the Managers and Senior Practitioners, They observed progress in the managers footprint on the Childrens files. Social Workers spoke about the children and families they work with and knew them well. Essex observed progress with the Children subject to Child in Need plans. Family Support Workers are allocated to the case to complete direct work. They saw regular visits to children. They noted further areas for development. They would have liked to have seen consistency of SMART Child in Need plans, family meetings taking place, family safety plans being in place and good quality assessments.
17. The good performance observed in Q1 in relation to statutory visits has slightly declined in Q2, particularly in August. This improved again during September and it is anticipated that performance will continue to improve from here on. A number of factors have impacted upon performance, including staff annual leave and various staff members isolating due to the pandemic at different times, both of which have put more pressure on our duty system. We continue to perform poorly in completing timely Child and Family Assessments; this is being closely monitored and within the improvement plan.
18. In Q2 we have worked to identify and resolve the system issues which are preventing the timely recording of core groups and child in need reviews, and timely managerial oversight of these plans and meetings. Data cleansing activity has been underway in Q2 for CIN reviews, and is just commencing for core groups in Q3. The service has taken a number of positive strides in Q2 with issues where there has been poor compliance for a long time, namely delegated authority and case summaries. At the beginning of Q3 for the first time we have regular data available to evidence completion of Graded Care Profile and current performance remains poor. Targets have been set to increase this over Q3.
19. The service had a revisit from Essex Local Authority in August 2020, following a diagnostic visit in November 2019. The reviewers were pleasantly surprised at the progress the service has made in the intervening months, despite the restrictions of the current pandemic and the resultant impact on staff morale. The reviewers found an "immediately evident shift in culture, morale, confidence and presentation" of the workforce and that managers were able to talk in more detail than previously about our direction of travel and priorities for improvement. They also commented that staff said they felt "valued, supported and challenged", and they heard a cultural shift in the way social workers talked about children and their families.

20. The local authority continues to have a relatively very high number of looked after children. At the end of quarter 2 there were 337 children in care which equates to 93 per 10,000, which is significantly higher than the national average (65 per 10,000) and that of statistical neighbours (54 per 10,000). The number of looked after children has been fairly stable over recent months but has reduced slightly during the quarter.
21. Care orders have been discharged for 8 children in the LAC teams in this quarter - 1 child was reunified and 7 children became subject to special guardianship orders (SGOs). At the end of quarter 2 -27 applications were filed either with court or with legal services to achieve children's exit from the care system. There were 12 SGO applications and 11 care order discharge applications filed with court. There are a further 4 SGO and no care order discharge applications filed with legal services. 18 children have been formally long-term matched.
22. The number of young people engaged with education, training or employment has improved significantly and focus now needs to be on sustaining this as the impact of COVID is felt. Audit programme has shown improvement in quality of practice although further improvement is required.
23. There is an overall upward trend in audited children's records being graded as "good" and an overall downward trend in cases being graded as "inadequate". Four thematic audits undertaken this quarter were re-audits. It was possible to evidence effective use of targeted support and learning in order to achieve overall improvements in quality and impact for children and young people within the findings from all of these audits. Although still in the early stages, staff at all levels are beginning to model Signs of Safety language and behaviours in their approach to working with families and each other

Community impact

24. In accordance with the adopted code of corporate governance, Herefordshire Council is committed to promoting a positive working culture that accepts, and encourages constructive challenge, and recognises that a culture and structure for scrutiny are key elements for accountable decision making, policy development and review. To support effective accountability the council is committed to reporting the progress on action completed and outcomes achieved.
25. The successful implementation of the improvement plan will continue to bring about further progress towards achieving the council's priorities of keeping young people safe and giving them a great start in life, contributing to Herefordshire's Children and Young People's Plan.
26. 2019-2024 priorities. Furthermore, enabling residents to live safe, healthy and independent lives; improving access to learning opportunities at all levels and improved outcomes for all children and young people, and those contained within priority two of the health and wellbeing strategy.
27. The families and carers of vulnerable children and young people are experiencing different and improved approaches to service delivery as we continue our implementation of the actions set out in our plan and in the context of the plan's status within the wider children's development plan. This includes looked after children and care leavers up to the age of 25.

Environmental Impact

28. Whilst this is a decision on back office functions and will have minimal environmental impacts, consideration has been made to minimise waste and resource use in line with the Council's Environmental Policy.

Equality duty

29. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

30. A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to - eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;

- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

31. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. We continue to make sure that as our improvement plan is implemented that we pay due regard to equality legislation.

32. The Safeguarding and Family Support improvement plan supports the council in its overall duty to promote equality. In particular, the implementation of the plan continues to improve the outcomes of children and young people, by ensuring any protected characteristics are assessed and assist children and young people and their families to access services to meet their needs.

Resource implications

33. There are no resource implications arising from the recommendation. The resource implication of any recommendations made by the committee will inform the executive's response to those recommendations.

34. The implementation of the improvement plans required additional resources; these have been considered as part of the council's budget setting process; including what could be done in terms of prevention and edge of care services which has been implemented.

Legal implications

35. There are no specific legal implications of the recommendation of this report.

Risk management

36. The risks associated with the failure to implement the improvement plan are:

- a. The council does not deliver sustained improvement. Too many children and young people receive a poor service, there is drift and delay, children, and young people receive high threshold services that are reactive. There is not sufficient capacity for good social work to flourish and there are not a range of effective preventative and edge of care services to support children and young people safely in families. The

council then runs the risk of being judged as inadequate by Ofsted under the ILAC's framework.

- b. Reputational. The council does not make progress quickly enough and adversely affects the recruitment and retention of social work staff. This can have a knock on effect of increasing caseloads, which in turn has the potential to negatively impact on performance and quality of services for children and families. Consequently, the council would have to invest significant resources to then rectify the situation.

37. The risks to successful delivery of the plan are:

- a. If insufficient resource is identified to implement the action plan in full. If this occurs there is a risk that the council will not deliver sustained improvement.
- b. Change in culture and practice does not take place quickly or robustly enough and is not sustained. Accurate performance management information that is used at least weekly to manage and improve service delivery is a critical part of culture change, alongside capacity, training and development, audit work and changing practice as a result.

Consultees

38. The safeguarding and family support services regularly engage our children about the performance and delivery of our services to ensure that the voice of the child is heard within the feedback on our children and families within Herefordshire young people have been actively involved in safeguarding briefings to all newly and re-elected councillors.

39. We have implemented a system called "Mind Of My Own" that will enable young people and children to provide feedback on the services that they are receiving from children and families; the app enable young people to have their voices heard and to participate in decisions about their lives. This will provide us with rich qualitative data that will be used to enable us to continue our journey of improvement and influence our plans.

Appendices

Appendix A – Safeguarding and Family Support Improvement Plan 2020/21

Appendix B – Our priorities definitions

Appendix C – Herefordshire Children's Safeguarding Social Work Self-Assessment to the end of quarter 2

Appendix D – Safeguarding and Family Support monthly scorecard September 2020

Background papers

None identified

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.