

Independent Assurance Work – March/April 2021

What we are doing

- A lead consultant and 3 additional consultants have been appointed. The lead consultant and one of the additional consultants are in place on a part-time basis, and it is anticipated that the full team will be in place within the next two weeks
- A draft work plan has been developed, with a clear scope and objectives, shaped around two phases, 'case review and understanding' and 'improvement'. Objectives of the work plan are:
 - To assure quality and safe decision making for children in care cases that are currently before the court (particularly Special Guardianship Orders – SGOs)
 - To assure quality and safe decision making of other looked after children before they reach Court (e.g., SGO assessments and support plans)
 - To review the quality of recording on these cases, management oversight and case supervision
 - To identify areas of practice that need to improve or where systems/processes need to be robust, make recommendations, and support implementation of more robust practice / systems / processes
 - To consider whether work on reducing looked after children numbers has led to unsafe decision making for children and young people
 - To develop a single response plan with aligned work streams (practice development, workforce, communications, HR)

Case review and understanding phase (April – mid-July):

- The first area of focus for the team is Special Guardianship (SGO's), in line with the concerns raised in the current court proceedings regarding the 'T' children. Pending the publication of the judgement the team had already begun auditing case files of those children where SGO is the plan in order to be reassured of their safety and the quality of assessment and planning. The priority of the audits will be:
 - Current Special Guardianship Orders before the Court, with those soonest audited first. These will be paper audits due to the pressing need for assurance.
 - Upcoming Special Guardianship Orders, beginning with completed assessments then assessments that are in progress – this will be a more collaborative approach, which will enable action learning
 - Permanence planning where Special Guardianship Orders are included in the care plan
 - Special Guardianship Orders that have recently concluded (over the past 12 months) to assess the quality of the support offered to the special guardians and the children and young people they are looking after.
- Following publication of the judgement, the audit schedule and work plan of the team will be reviewed with more focus on:
 - A comprehensive review of the historic and more recent practice regarding the family
 - Additional areas of practice identified through analysis of the judgement and other court cases
 - Additional areas of practice identified during auditing work and speaking with practitioners (e.g., Children on placement with parents, children where revocation of the care order is planned).

Improvement phase (Mid-July – September following a 3 month stage review):

- A system has been established for gathering and analysing evidence of strengths and areas for development which will be used throughout the project
- The learning will be collated and triangulated with what is already known through the QA arrangements, practice development work and the findings of the 3 day diagnostic being undertaken by Essex during Easter week
- Recommendations for any improvement actions made will be aligned to other improvement programmes and plans across Children's Services.

Action learning approach:

- Work on the priority objectives has already begun – an audit tool has been developed and used to audit records of three families of children/young people where applications for SGO have been filed with court
- An 'action learning' approach is being taken to the work, in order to ensure that priority improvements to assurance processes are made without delay, rather than waiting for the 'improvement' phase of the work plan
- Some of the early issues identified during the audit work are detailed below, along with the improvement action that is being taken.

Immediate changes we are making:

An Improved system to quality assure and sign off any changes to care plans where special guardianship is proposed as follows:

- Arrangements to be put in place for sign off of SGOs following audits
- Proposals for the establishment of a panel to oversee arrangements with our legal service for discharging care orders through SGOs. The Independent Assurance Team will contribute to these developments by reviewing the terms and membership of the different panels e.g. the legal gateway and legal planning meetings to ensure arrangements are sufficiently robust and aligned.
- The scheme of delegation is under review by the team with recommended changes, this to ensure due diligence arrangements and assurance measures are in place by senior leaders.
- A single permanency tracker to be established which aligns with developing assurance and panel processes and is kept up to date – meeting arranged for 15.04.21 to progress this work