

**REPORT OF THE IMPROVEMENT QUARTET: COUNCILLOR SIR
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**BIRMINGHAM EARLY HELP AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES
IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2015-2017**

1. Where have we come from?

- 1.1 Birmingham's children's social care services have performed poorly for a considerable time. In 2008 Ofsted formally rated the services as inadequate and the DfE issued an improvement notice. The services remained inadequate following subsequent Ofsted inspections despite the use of improvement boards, several reviews, and the appointment of interim and permanent strategic directors. A DfE review in 2014, led by Professor Julian Le Grand, identified similar failings and recommended the appointment of a children's commissioner.
- 1.2 Under the direction of Peter Hay, as Strategic Director, the service began to stabilise in late 2013; Mark Rogers joined the Council as Chief Executive in March 2014 and, in the same month, Lord Norman Warner began his work as Children's Commissioner for a year.

2. What have we achieved?

- 2.1 Year 1 of the Improvement Plan, as part of the response to Government Directions and with the oversight of Lord Warner, was delivered. The primary focus in year 1 was on establishing the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), a highly visible single point of referral and multi-agency information sharing to ensure children's needs are responded to, establishing a credible budget for Children's services and stabilising the workforce. All of these were achieved.
- 2.2 There is now a new plan for years 2 and 3, the 'Early Help and Children's Social Care improvement plan 2015-17' with a stronger focus on improving social work practice and delivering more effective interventions with children and families. The service is almost fully staffed, although still relying on agency staff for 30% of posts and social workers have more manageable caseloads (average 18). Thresholds have been established for early help and social care through the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board (Right Service, Right Time) and an early help strategy is in place, with a strong targeted early help offer. A system-wide Early Help and Safeguarding Partnership has been established to shape service responses and the offer across agencies and settings.
- 2.3 There is clear vision and purpose and direction for the service and more stable leadership with improved political ownership and oversight of the improvement journey through the Children's Safeguarding Improvement Quartet. However, there is still some way to go to ensure all children and families receive a responsive and effective service that engages with them to enable positive change.

The Council has made children's services its top priority and has invested much-needed money into the service - making a further £21.5m available for 2015/16 (on top of an extra £9.6m in 2014/15).

- 2.4 **Recruitment and retention** of social workers remains a challenging area with 29% of front-line social workers and 25% of team managers agency staff. However, the sum is now almost fully staffed: vacancies are down from 55.7 April-June 2014 to 9.9 in September 2015 and turnover has decreased from 26.8% to 19.6% leading to greater stability in the workforce and more consistency for children and families. Recruitment of newly qualified social workers, social workers, team managers and foster carers is improving. There is a new contract in place to procure agency staff through a single master agency (HCL), and this will over time reduce cost and improve quality.
- 2.5 There is a new **workforce development plan** with a focus on evidence-based and systemic practice and a new supervision policy that improves management oversight and privileges reflective practice. Assessment and short-term intervention teams and area resource panels have been set up to provide more timely assessment, management oversight of decision-making, and more support and challenge. The focus is on embedding relationship and evidence-based social work intervention at the core of practice in both targeted early help and social work, within a culture of high support and high challenge. To this end a chief social work officer (CSWO) and three principal social workers are now in place to drive practice improvement.
- 2.6 In July 2014 the Council launched the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and that is now an established city-wide point of entry for contacts and referrals for early help, children in need and child protection. MASH has improved partnership working by bringing Police, Health and Probation colleagues together to share information. In the first six months there was a big increase in contact and referrals resulting in more child protection (CP) plans, more assessments and higher caseloads as well as high levels of unallocated work. In the last 6 months the early help response has improved, assessment teams have been set up to respond to child in need work and there have been fruitful discussions with partners about thresholds for child protection enquiries (s.47). As a result contact, referral and assessment rates have stabilised at manageable levels, the amount of unallocated cases has dramatically reduced and average caseloads are now 18.
- 2.7 A multi-agency **Early Help** Strategy is being implemented with partners, alongside a new multi-agency agreement about levels of need for children – 'Right Service, Right Time'. In June an Assistant Director for Early Help and Youth Justice was appointed and is developing a consistent targeted early help service across the city, bringing together Family Support and 'Think Family' (Birmingham's Troubled Families services) to provide a consistent key worker-based service to families requiring intensive support, below social work intervention.
- 2.8 There is a cultural shift from a focus on process/repeated assessment towards **more direct work with families** to enable them to make positive changes and thus improve outcomes for the children. The aim is that by undertaking more direct social work interventions with families it will be possible to support more children to live at home with their families safely. This requires a change in culture in the social work teams with social workers providing more direct work and evidence-based interventions as part of the child in need or child protection plan. It also requires stronger management oversight, support and practice leadership.

- 2.9 There is also evidence of improved **corporate parenting and children in care council** arrangements. To improve services for the children and families services work with ways to more actively listen and learn from them are being developed.
- 2.10 The **Independent Reviewing Officer Service** (IRO) has been managed by Cafcass since November 2014 and a better performing service returned to Council management in October 2015. Children in care are now being tracked more systematically to reduce delays in their care journey and IRO are providing more constructive challenge and support to social workers.
- 2.11 **Children in care** are getting more timely reviews and better care planning. There is a substantial programme of improvement in fostering and adoption which includes the bringing in-house of foster carer, adopter and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) assessments and a substantial recruitment of foster carers and adoptive families to improve quality and reduce reliance on expensive external agencies.
- 2.12 There is a **senior management team** in place made up entirely of permanent appointments - ending the cycle of interim leadership change and failure to drive effective practice change which has characterised Birmingham's recent history. Senior managers are being held to account for their leadership and performance and action is being taken when deficits are apparent.
- 2.13 New reflective **supervision policy and arrangements** have been introduced for social workers along with a new outcomes-focused, much less bureaucratic appraisal system in 2015. A culture of challenge and support and learning and accountability is actively being developed at all levels supported by a workforce plan that is about practice learning. This includes tackling poor performance without letting issues drift.
- 2.14 There is strong **political commitment** to improving outcomes for children in Birmingham and supporting children's services with resources and the tools to deliver these outcomes. Collectively the Leader, Cabinet Member, Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services maintain regular **oversight** of the improvement plan; there will be an assessment of the DCS/Lead Member arrangements at the end of 2015/16 and there will be a resources test as part of establishing the 2016/17 budget.
- 2.15 **Partnership working** around children's services has been poor for some considerable time. Over the last year the introduction of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and challenges from Lord Warner, have combined to create some momentum to different partnership structures and ways of working. The new **Children's Strategic Leaders Forum** signals strategic and high level attention to improving children's outcomes. The forum is able to consider children's issues within the wider context of families' experiences and the opportunities and challenges presented by the city. It will take an overview of the systems working to support children and families in the city so that they are all aligned and working together to deliver that intention. The forum will challenge gaps in coordination and delivery and ensure that the vision for services is stretching and ambitious.
- 2.16 The **Early Help and Safeguarding Partnership** oversees the delivery of the Early Help strategy and the shape of multiagency working to meet the needs of children and their families from universal to specialist, including locality working in hubs, districts and areas and central processes such as the MASH. This is co-chaired by the City Council and West Midlands Police. This partnership will also develop models for more local partnership working in each of the City's three Areas. The **Children's Joint Commissioning Partnership**

Board enables the NHS and the Council to align finance and jointly commission a series of services to children. Where these have been agreed, this group has the responsibility to design ways in which the identified needs of children will be met and for monitoring and evaluating the success of these interventions. The board has recently supported and accelerated progress in relation to 0-25 mental health services and the special education development plan.

- 2.17 The **Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP)** is a school-led organisation, working to build a robust and ambitious system of continuous improvement, building on existing strengths amongst Birmingham schools and school leadership. BEP will ensure that no school is isolated or unsupported. BEP will also have a developing safeguarding role and will work with early help and children's social care to improve the whole system. The City Council has commissioned BEP to deliver the school improvement function from September 2015, aligned with the development of strong local partnership and engagement, including with children and young people.
- 2.18 There have been two positive and helpful improvement visits from Ofsted, looking at MASH (January 2015) and the Assessment function (September 2015). Future visits looking at child protection and children in care are planned over the next 6 months.

3. What next?

- 3.1 There is still a need to develop quality assurance and performance management systems to embed learning from practice and tackling poor performance more quickly. It is also necessary to ensure that the systems and processes, information and data sharing around child sexual exploitation (CSE), children missing from home, care and education, and children who might be influenced by radicalisation, are all working more effectively and delivering better outcomes for the children and young people affected. There is a strong youth offending service which has developed effective partnership working that engages vulnerable young people and their families which children's social work can learn from.
- 3.2 **Quality assurance (QA)** remains an under-developed area but a new case file audit system is currently being put in place. A strong **focus on practice** needs to be maintained and there is still some way to go to achieve consistent good quality assessment, effective interventions and purposeful plans for all children in need or care in the city.
- 3.3 The CSWO will lead on developing effective social work practice and help build effective QA systems that produce learning to inform improvement at area, team and individual levels. There is a new QA framework and a new case audit system is being launched. There is also a programme of monthly service area focused performance meetings to improve how services work together (this is in addition to arrangements in each Area) and a performance real-time scorecard has been developed for teams in CareFirst. Two peer challenges are being undertaken within West Midlands in next few months – one about leaving care services and another about the case audit system.
- 3.4 High numbers of older teenagers are entering care and it is recognised that such young people and their families need to be offered a service focused on mediation and support and learning ways of managing difficult behaviour and emotional regulation. A short-term intensive 'Edge of Care' service is being developed and goes live in December 2015, to work with teenagers and their families to prevent family breakdown.

- 3.5 Timescales in care proceedings will be reduced through more engagement with families to bring about change in pre-proceedings and a reduction in specialist assessment requests. Birmingham has a good relationship with the Birmingham & Solihull Family Court and CAFCASS, recognising the imperative to work together in facing the same set of challenges.
- 3.6 For care leavers better pathway planning is needed to support more young people in good accommodation and reduce the percentage of care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). To this end Birmingham is part of a DfE pilot working with St Basils to improve accommodation and support options for 16 and 17 year olds and care leavers.
- 3.7 Working with the Department for Education (DfE), University of Birmingham and the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB) the Council is exploring alternative approaches to **assuring safeguarding**, via a commissioned separate and independent audit body with the tools and authority to hold agencies to account.
- 3.8 There are plans to replace the CareFirst data and case management system with a more modern and fit for purpose system that will be much easier for social workers to use and thus free them to spend more time in direct work with children and families.
- 3.9 The Future Council programme has regard for the children's services improvement plan. A number of 'cases for change' about children's services have been pulled together under the heading 'Preventing Family Breakdown' with the intention of gradually and safely reducing the number of children in care over the next three years as well as increasing the number of local fostering placements to support them. This Future Council case for change recognises that improvement can only be sustained and demand effectively managed if attention is paid to ensuring the system is a coherent whole.
- 3.10 A 'Commissioning Centre for Excellence' has been established across the People directorate and a programme of review of externally commissioned services has commenced, with a greater focus on targeted services, improved quality, impact and value for money.
- 3.11 Subject to Cabinet approval, the procurement process for the proposed externalisation of 5 BCC children's homes is being finalised.
- 3.12 Consultation on a substantial and complex new commissioning of early years services is planned, seeking to amalgamate health visiting, children's centres and other under 5s services on a district model, offering more targeted focus in areas of greater deprivation.
- 3.13 The DfE have appointed Essex County Council Children's Services as the Council's improvement partner. A programme of diagnostic peer/self-assessments in front-line teams has been agreed, followed by practice learning seminars between October 2015 and July 2016. Essex will report back on issues of quality, practice, management oversight and leadership. Essex will also report progress to DfE.
- 3.14 The DfE is also actively considering its follow up to Lord Warner whose time as Commissioner concluded in May 2015.

4. Conclusion

The service has moved from an initial period of stabilisation to the implementation of a series of critical improvements in line with the agreed improvement plan. The focus in year 2 of the plan now shifts to the quality of practice and more effective and early interventions with families aimed at enabling positive changes, preventing family breakdown and improving care planning for children and young people. The service is working to a clear plan approved by the Department for Education and with the support of the DfE-appointed improvement partner Essex County Council. There is now a firm foundation on which to build, together with partners, effective and sustainable early help and children's social care services. We remain committed to seeing the plan through to the end of year 3.

MOTION

The progress to date is noted and welcomed.

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