



Report to Cabinet

Date: 29 June 2021

Title: Children's Services Improvement Plan Update

Relevant councillor(s): Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Children's Service

Author and/or contact officer: Richard Nash, Corporate Director Children's Services

Ward(s) affected: All

Recommendation: For Cabinet to note the current progress of the Ofsted Improvement Plan and the continued impact of COVID-19 on the service.

Content of report

1. The impact of COVID-19 has led to significant rise in demand that continues to be unpredictable. This coupled with an increase in the complexity and seriousness of situations that children and young people find themselves in, is having a substantial impact on workloads; however, the service's response to ensure children and young people are kept safe continues to be of paramount importance.
2. The challenges created by increases in demand which require our intervention began throughout the latter part of 2020. The service has and continues to experience a significant rise in demand creating further pressure on the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), Assessment and Help and Protection Teams. In order to manage the changes in workload safely, the service has moved resources to support the 'front door' and additional workers have been employed on a temporary basis to create capacity. The Senior Management Team (SMT) has remained focused on ensuring that staff are supported and that standards in practice are maintained. This has been achieved to date in spite of the uncertainty all local authorities face in the current environment.
3. Analysis of our data confirms the changes that the service is experiencing and what is more pronounced are the changes in 'seriousness' of incidents involving children and young people. This significant changes in casework that is complex such as sexual abuse, mental health and substance misuse, results in a disproportionate impact on the social work time required to manage each case.
4. Despite the pressures in the service during the last 9 months, work on the Improvement Plan has continued. Within the MASH, there has been a 40% increase in contacts

compared with last April yet the MASH has maintained good performance with a decision made on 96% of contacts within 24 hours and 95% of referrals completed in 72 hours.

5. The evidence of demand changes is also very clear from the data, particularly the over 60% increase in strategy meetings and those leading to Section 47 enquiries. That said, caseloads remain manageable for the majority of social workers across the assessment teams.
6. The performance data in relation to our Help and Protection teams highlights increases in demand in relation to child protection plans. Caseloads do not highlight serious problems although there are a small number of workers with slightly more children allocated to them than we would want.
7. The Children in Care team are progressing forward and are actively addressing the well documented challenges from last year. The team is fully staffed, and the team manager is fully focused on improvement, especially in terms of quality. Quality assurance activity has demonstrated improvements in direct work with children and young people in care. Analysis of case recordings show thoughtful and effective direct work with young people and increasingly effective management oversight that influences care planning. Where casework is dip sampled or audited in the Children in Care team there are increasing examples of good quality work which indicate the right direction of travel at the right pace.
8. Improvements have been made in the relationship between Personal Advisors (PA) and care leavers. This is evident from quality assurance work. The staff group is now more settled, and managers are improving their grip on the work. This has led to improvements in visiting frequencies, the number of care leavers 'in touch' with the service and pathway plans. Quality assurance processes allow for there to be a focus on where performance can improve further particularly in relation to management oversight and supervision. The expectation is that managers will provide a robust quality check on case work and ensure that pathway plans, for example are of sufficient quality and that casework delivers the actions required of the plan. The team has an upward trajectory and progress is being closely monitored by the Head of Service.
9. What our quality assurance processes tell us is that we have more to do to improve the overall standard of management oversight and supervision and to improve consistency. Detailed and focused work is underway to do this. Each first and second-line manager has received detailed feedback on where improvement needs to be made and how to achieve this. It is our view that increasing the effectiveness of management oversight and supervision will make the difference to securing 'good' outcomes for children and young people.
10. The improvement plan (Appendix 1) has one area of red in terms of RAG rating. That is 4.10 'Children in care have a clear permanency plan by their second review.' It is expected that there will be sufficient evidence for this to be 'amber' by the time this plan is

reviewed next. Almost all other areas are 'amber'. This indicates that the service is maintaining and making progress in all other areas; however, there is no complacency on the part of managers and staff and it is clear that there are risks to progress, particularly in relation to recruitment and retention, demand changes and service resilience. The unwavering focus of senior leaders is to continue to understand the service in terms of the impact and performance of each first line manager and provide support, learning and challenge to their work to ensure outcomes for our children and young people consistently improve. It is clear that if first line managers deliver highly effective levels of direction and support then the work will be consistently of the standard that we need it to and have a positive impact for children and young people.

11. The recruitment of both qualified social workers and first and second-line managers remains a very high priority for the service. It is clear that the combined impact of working remotely for a significant period, the increased exposure to disturbing scenarios involving children and the increases in demand all have an impact on our staff. Staff support continues to remain extremely important.

Other options considered

N/A

Legal and financial implications

N/A

Corporate implications

N/A

Consultation and communication

N/A

Next steps and review

N/A

Background papers

Appendix 1 – Improvement Plan

