

Report of: Corporate Director of Children's Services

Meeting of:	Date	Ward(s)
Children's Services Scrutiny Committee	11 January 2017	All

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SUBJECT: Safeguarding Children Annual Report

1. Synopsis

- 1.1 This report provides an update to the Committee on the progress being made in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of Islington's most vulnerable children.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Committee scrutinise and note the content of the report.

3. Headline Performance

- 3.1 Contact volumes in the first half of the year remain higher than last year. A rise in September followed the usual dip in August during the school summer holidays. The long term rise in contacts coincides with the introduction of a single front door approach to early help, targeted and specialist services, which means that more Contacts are being routed via the Contact team. This is helpful as it allows us to better understand the whole demand for service. Nearly a third of contacts (30%) are now stepped down to targeted services, which again reflects this change.

- 3.2 Referrals to Children's Social Care are rising; as the proportion of referrals compared to the number of contacts has also risen. We understand this rise to be related to the significant deprivation levels in the borough as well as increased awareness of the safeguarding needs of adolescents. This rise in referrals is also reflected across London. Police and schools still account for the majority of referrals as they are the agencies in most contact with children and young people. Repeat referrals remain at just over 20% and are in line with published national averages (22% in 2015/16). More assessments are also being completed, with (79%) carried out within 45 days. The local profile of factors identified during assessments differs from the national picture with over half of cases involving domestic abuse; and 50% involving concerns about mental health, higher proportions also identified alcohol and substance misuse (2015/16 newly published). There has been a considerable amount of work undertaken in the last few months, including the review of the Contact Service, to look at thresholds for social care and early help. In general the thresholds for a social care assessment have been found to be appropriate.
- 3.3 The rate of child protection investigations remains fairly consistent with previous trends, having dipped last year. There has been an increase in the time cases are taking to get to an initial conference from 63% taken to conference within 15 days (against a London average of 69%) in 2015/16 to a predicted 53% for this year. It is important to note however that 89% are completed within 30 days. The current pressures relate to demand on conference facilities which are being robustly addressed. All cases are allocated and risk is actively managed during the period between strategy meeting and conference so any delay does not impact on the wellbeing of the child. Islington has similar rates of child protection plans as statistical neighbours and the national average. Very few children are the subject of plans which last longer than two years and 10 children to date have had repeat child protection plans starting during the year. The rate of repeat plans increased in 2015/16 up to the end of March, to its highest for several years (22%); an audit was carried out looking at these cases to draw down any learning points and it was clear that the majority of these children had been subject to plans several years ago and where an escalation of risk several years later could not have been anticipated. The rate this year is much reduced.
- 3.4 There has been a strong focus on case recording of supervision and visits to children over this last quarter and this is reflected in strong performance data in these areas. At the end of September 2016, data showed that 70% of children had been visited within the recommended monthly timescale. Delays in visiting outside this timescale are generally related to families being away or unavailable or challenges in engaging some adolescents. Almost all children subject of a protection plan are seen at least every four weeks (95%) and 63% are seen fortnightly. Children looked after visits are up at 87% which is above target.
- 3.5 There are currently 5 Private Fostering arrangements which are open to the service. There is a robust action plan in place, which is approved and monitored by the Islington safeguarding Children Board, to raise awareness further and increase the numbers of referrals regarding children who may be privately fostered within Islington.
- 3.6 There has been a sustained reduction in the number of Children Looked After (CLA) to 339 in September, following a rise over the last two years (370 end September 2015) and it appears that the trend is downward, though further analysis is needed. Our profile of children becoming looked after remains skewed towards the older age range. This reflects both the increase in UASC over this last year and high numbers of young people who are accommodated as a result of presenting as homeless. We are currently taking no new UASC as we have reached the 0.07% limit and this is reducing pressure on the service though we are likely to need to reconsider our position as other London Boroughs are beginning to also reach the limit through taking high numbers of young people arriving from Calais under the Dubs Amendment. We are also reviewing our approach to homeless young people with a view to supporting more young people to remain within their families as our research shows that significant numbers of young people who become looked after at 16 or 17 are failing to use their accommodation and returning home or to extended family.

- 3.7 Placement stability is good, with most children in long term care remaining in the same placement for at least 2 years. Fewer children have had 3 or more placements so far this year compared to the same point last year, and this is on track to meet local targets. Four children were placed for adoption at the end of September 2016 and more children are finding a permanent home through adoption (12 so far this year; compared to 9 the whole of 2015/16).
- 3.8 Since the start of the year 68 children looked after have been reported missing or absent from care one or more times (390 incidents). Most children reported missing from home have been missing once; and there are roughly 35 children reported missing from home each month. Children who go missing are offered a return home interview from targeted youth services and where appropriate a strategy discussion and/or safety plan is established. Feedback from return home interviews, MASE and from Missing strategy meetings suggests that the key reason for young people going missing for extended periods of time or repeatedly relates to CSE, gang involvement or County Lines. Strategy Meetings are chaired by the CSE/Missing coordinator and the police are now co located at least one day a week to ensure strategy meetings can take place in a timely way. Discussions with our police colleagues in order to improve consistency regarding the management of high risk Missing young people are underway.
- 3.9 Local provisional figures indicate health checks and immunisations are expected to remain above national. There has been a positive increase in the completion of Personal Education Plans for children looked after (92% summer term 2015/16). Care leavers in education, employment or training (EET) and those remaining in higher education is expected to remain stable and this compares well with previous national outturns. We currently have 48 (11.6 %) of our care leavers at University. Only 10 (4%) of our 17 year old care leavers are NEET in comparison to the national figure of 30% though this data needs to be treated with some caution because of variation in the way the national data is gathered.

4. Social work practice

A quality assurance framework is in place to monitor and track the quality of practice across social care. This includes regular file audits, carried out by managers at all levels and the findings from these are fed into planning and training and development activity. A 'practice week' where managers work alongside practitioners and have an opportunity to see practice on the ground is planned for February 2017. A Service Development Plan which addresses all priority areas for development, improvement and consolidation of good practice is in place and is used by the Senior Management Team, alongside the Performance data and quality assurance information to track progress.

5. Caseloads

Caseload sizes have stabilised over this last quarter with an average of 15 cases per worker across the service, which is a significantly improving picture. However, considerable pressures remain in Independent Futures (see paragraph 6) and the range of caseload size in the Children In Need teams, where newly qualified (ASYE) social workers need a protected caseload, can fluctuate considerably in response to the increase in referrals. Although 15 cases per worker is generally accepted as the good practice maximum, it is hoped that the continued focus on evidence based practice can reduce caseloads further, allowing more intensive work to be fully embedded.

6. Independent Futures

A review of the Care Leavers Service, Independent Futures, is in progress. Consideration will be given, via this review, to the age young people transfer from the Children Looked After Service into Independent Futures and what kind of model of practice would best support young people into independent and self sustained lives. While many young people, particularly if they have been in stable care for a long time, move on into independence successfully, significant numbers, particularly those who come into care later in their lives, need a great deal of support at this time. The review is due for completion in April 2017.

7. Children's Services Contact Team

An external review of the Children's Services Contact Team, which is the first point of contact for all concerns about children, was carried out in October 2016. This found children to be safe and that thresholds for early help and social work involvement were appropriate. Recommendations regarding an update of the Information Sharing protocol and structure of the team to improve capacity are being progressed.

8. Review of Early Help Services

An external review of the Early Help services was carried out in October. Key findings were;

- Once staff engage with families they provide high quality support which is valued by the families and which improves the lives of the children involved.
- There are very strong efforts to engage families made by practitioners, who are persistent and attempt a number of ways to secure engagement. However the reviewer found that significant numbers of families remain reluctant to engage and suggested that earlier closure of these cases would free staff up to work more intensively with the families who are engaged.
- The implementation of a new recording system across the early help services, EHM, has created some temporary difficulties in accessing records and ensuring that communication is effective during the implementation phase. This is being robustly progressed with our colleagues in Digital Services.

The recommendations from this review have been incorporated into the Early Help action plan

9. Virtual School

An external review has been carried of the Virtual School to support us in setting the direction for the next few years and reported in early December. It is clear that the Virtual School has significant strengths and supports many of our Children Looked After to succeed and to access further education. There are challenges however in meeting the needs of the cohort of young people who come into care in their teens and this will be given some priority going forward. The Virtual Head position is currently being held by an interim and will be advertised in January 2017.

10. Vulnerable adolescents

New systems and processes for managing missing children, introduced in August are now well embedded and have improved the accuracy of reporting and the planning for these children. Key themes regarding missing children continue to relate to CSE and 'county lines'. The MASE panel has also identified a theme relating to high numbers of terminations and miscarriages in girls at risk of CSE. The ISCB Missing and CSE sub group draws these themes together through its action planning and there is an increasing focus across the service and the partnership in joining up practice across the CSE, missing and gangs work. A new approach to child protection conferences and to CLA reviews is being developed in order to better focus on the networks around these high risk young people. Gangs training has recently been delivered to social work and other Children's Services staff. This was very well attended and well evaluated.

11. Measuring What Matters and Doing What Counts and evidence based practice

In 2014 Islington was successful in a bid to the DfE Innovation in Social work Fund and received £3.5 million to develop a new model of social work practice within the Children in Need Service. This model is called Motivational Social Work (MSW) and is based on establishing strong, empathic and purposeful relationships with families and on intensive intervention to bring about change. The programme has been in place for a year within the Children in Need service and is beginning to impact positively on the numbers of children subject to care proceedings.

In June 2016, we applied to the DfE for the 2nd stage of funding as one of 8 Partners in Practice authorities working with the DfE on sector led improvement. Islington's bid focusses on 3 key areas;

- An extension of MSW practice into the Children Looked After and Independent Futures services
- The development of an MSW supervision model
- Using the improvements in social work practice and skill, developed through MSW, as the means of endorsing social workers to go forward for accreditation under the new government social worker accreditation scheme.

The funding was agreed in October 2016 and work has now commenced on the next phase.

At the same time an extensive consultation exercise has been carried out across the social work, early help, YOS and TYS services to inform the further planning and development of relationship based practice across the service. The findings from this exercise will be available in late January 2017.

12. PACE review

Islington is currently in a Judicial Review (JR) process related to the use of overnight police custody of young people under 18. The legal guidance on these cases is that the police should refer young people to the local authority to provide a bed overnight to avoid the use of police custody for vulnerable young people, once they have been charged. There are challenges both with regard to police requests being made and when they are, with securing beds at short notice. Although the JR is related to one young person there are likely to be repercussions across London and nationally as provision of PACE beds is a challenge for most authorities.

There is a current stay on the JR process in order to allow the Islington Safeguarding Children Board to carry out a review both about the individual case in question and the wider practice issues in this area. This review has now been completed and submitted to the court.

13. Ealing case review

Ealing Adults Safeguarding Board is carrying out a case review regarding the young man from Islington, LW, who was killed in August 2016, by a young man from Ealing, when they were both placed in the same semi independent provision. Islington will be providing an Independent Management Report to this review which will focus both on the commissioning of the placement and the involvement with LW during his period in the placement. The timescale for this is currently to be confirmed but it is anticipated to be concluded early next year.

14. Workforce Strategy

A workforce strategy and development group has now been established and an action plan to address recruitment and retention and career development is in place. Islington will be joining the Frontline Programme, with a view to taking its first Frontline cohort of students in September 2017. Islington has also agreed to lead on development of the Step Up to Social Work programme for a number of North London authorities and will bring in the first Step Up cohort of students also in September 2017. A career progression programme, aligned with the developments in relationship based practice described above, is in development and will be introduced early next year.

The government is due to launch its formal consultation on the Knowledge and Skills for social workers and practice Leaders in December. This will set out proposed arrangements for the accreditation of social workers and Practice Leaders by 2020. There will be significant implications for recruitment and retention arising from these proposals which will be clearer once they are published.

15. Regionalisation of adoption services

The Government expects all adoption agencies to have regionalised by 2020. Work is in progress in London, through the London Adoption Board, to create a London adoption agency which will manage both the adoption recruitment and the adoption support functions through a single agency. An in principle agreement to this proposal is being sought from all Local Authorities and a paper is due to be presented to cabinet in February 2017 regarding this.

16. Implications

16.1 Financial Implications:

None

16.2 Legal Implications:

None

16.3 Environmental Implications:

None.

16.4 Equality Impact Assessment:

The Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The Council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The Council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

An assessment has not been carried out in relation to this report as it is a progress report on service improvements, rather than a new initiative or change in policy.

17. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

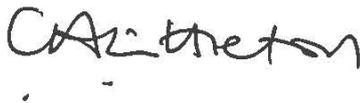
The Committee is invited to scrutinise and note the contents of the report.

Appendices: None.

Background papers: None.

Final report clearance:

Signed by:



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