

Report of: Corporate Director of Children's Services

Meeting of: Audit Committee

Date: 11<sup>th</sup> July 2023

Ward(s): All

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## Subject: Risk Deep-Dive: Safeguarding Children

### 1 Synopsis

In accordance with its Terms of Reference, the Audit Committee (the Committee) is required to consider the Council's arrangements for corporate governance and risk management.

The Committee agreed at its meeting in June 2022 to conduct regular deep-dives on individual Principal Risks. The purpose of the deep-dive is for the Committee to obtain a deeper understanding of the chosen risk area, develop insight into risk controls and the action plan, and to get the opportunity to discuss the risk directly with the risk lead.

#### 1. Recommendations

- 1.1. The Committee is asked to note the risk management strategy for this Principal Risk.

#### 2. Background

##### 2.1 Risk Context

- 2.2 All Local Authorities in conjunction with its partners have a duty to safeguarding children as set out in legislation and guidance. The system including children, families, communities, professionals, agencies involved in safeguarding children is complex and multi-faceted and co-ordination, assurance, review is always needed across the partnership.

### 2.3 Children's Social Care and Early Help Vision

Children and young people are safe, can overcome difficulties and can form secure relationships through their childhood and into their adulthood.

To achieve our vision, we

- support and work in partnership with parents and carers to help develop and build on safe, strong and lasting relationships with the children they care for.
- build a strong stable workforce of resilient practitioners who can make empathic, purposeful relationships with children, their families and carers that make a difference to children's lives. They will be able to learn from and adapt to evidence about what works best for children at risk, in need, or Looked After.
- have high aspirations for all the children we work with and support them to be the 'best they can be'.
- work with partner agencies to develop a common ethos and approach to our work and to minimise the number of professionals that children and families work with.
- ensure that our relationship-based approach is reflected at all levels of the service, from senior managers to family practitioners and support staff.

### 2.4 Characteristics of children supported

In 2022/23 we supported 2,203 children through early help. Our rates for Children in Need (CIN) and Child Protection (CP) Plans are relatively high compared with statistical neighbours, reflecting the high level of need in Islington. The CIN rate at 483 is second highest across our statistical neighbours. The CP rate of 37 at the end of March 2022 was the fourth highest among our statistical neighbours. We had 326 Children Looked After (CLA) including 35 unaccompanied asylum seekers and 624 care experienced young people as at March 2023.

There are more boys (54%) than girls (44%) supported; and the age profile varies across the status of children, with more adolescents looked after than younger age groups. Some global majority groups are over-represented in comparison to the Islington child population, while others are under-represented. Children of Black Caribbean and Mixed backgrounds are over-represented across all CIN, CP and CLA groups, Black Caribbean and Black African young people are over-represented in the care-leaver cohort. Work has been focused on reducing the disparity across the Safeguarding services with the Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership having addressing disproportionality as one of the priorities.

Based on the 2021 Census, there were 5,430 children and young people aged 0-24 who were disabled living in Islington, which equates to 9.0% of the resident population. This was above the national average of 8.5%. In January 2023, Islington was responsible for 1,780 Education, Health and Care Plans, an 18% increase from 2021.

The complexity of need has increased overall, and the service has also seen an increase in demand in some areas. A particular challenge since end of 2021 has been the increasing needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

Pressures due to Covid-19 impact, Brexit and cost of living crisis is creating national difficulties in the recruitment market for social workers and staff in residential care settings. The Council continues to work with stakeholders to address recruitment challenges. Despite these challenges, the Council has consistently maintained staffing

levels where we are able to respond to safeguarding concerns and comply with procedures.

The cost-of-living crisis is causing increased pressures on families which is manifesting in increasing cases of domestic violence, mental health and contextual safeguarding risks.

New legislation on unregulated accommodation for children in care is coming into force in September 2023 and is likely to further heighten the lack of suitable placements for 16–17-year-olds.

National reforms or changes in legislation and requirements, high profile child deaths can increase risks as demand for services increases.

If safeguarding practice and provision for children and young people are ineffective in relation to familial and extra familial risks the consequences are serious including fatality or significant harm to children

### 3. Mitigation

- 3.1 The service is currently judged by Ofsted to be Outstanding (March 2020) [50150002 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspections/50150002). A shorter inspection was carried out into children looked after and care leavers in October 2022 and whilst this is not a graded inspection findings were extremely positive [50199743 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspections/50199743). The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Inspection took place in November 2021 [50199743 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspections/50199743) and we are only one of a handful of Local Authorities not to receive a Written Statement of Action due to the positive findings regarding the provision of services for children with SEND.
- 3.2 The current risks are being managed by a number of mitigations in place. These include:
1. Robust Quality Assurance and monitoring processes in place.  
There is a comprehensive and robust quality assurance framework in place which ensures feedback from children, families, staff, partners, complaints, compliments, audits and observations of practice are acted upon and feedback into the system to drive forward improvements in service delivery.
  2. Training and development processes in place which give ongoing assurance regarding quality of work and adherence to legal framework  
All staff are trained in an evidenced based practice model “Motivation Practice” which ensures consistency and quality of intervention to children and families. This is alongside specific training on different areas of abuse and neglect both within the family and outside of the family (contextual safeguarding or extra familial harm). The staff also have access to all the training run for all agencies who work with children and families from the Islington Safeguarding Children’s Partnership.

3. Workforce strategy in place.  
The service has a comprehensive training and development strategy and plan for all staff. This is regularly reviewed by the Senior Leadership team 6 weekly.
4. Close liaison with family courts to ensure cases which can be heard progress to final hearing, so children are afforded permanency. Covid 19 caused a backlog in all courts and the Family Court, where Judges make decisions about the future care of children whether that be at home, with family members or in care, was no different. For children this has meant waiting for a decision about where they will be cared for the duration of their childhood. There were 56 such delayed cases running over 40 weeks (as opposed to the aim of permanency decisions to be made in court in 26 weeks), this currently stands at 26 cases and is reducing month on month.
5. Placements sufficiency strategy (additional resources in our placement team and working regionally to devise solutions).  
The national placement sufficiency crisis (having enough foster carers, residential children's homes or supported accommodation providers) continues to effect Islington children who are in care. The issue is being able to locate a suitable placement to protect, support, love and care for our children for the duration of their childhood. We have:
  - a) Increased the number of staff available to source such placement
  - b) Created innovative projects to secure more local foster carers and improved our recruitment drive
  - c) Worked regionally and nationally to alleviate the lack of care placements
  - d) Developed intensive wrap around intervention for adolescents to enable them to live within Islington and with their families free from contextual harm.
6. Increased mental health and clinical support in care leaving service for UASC children (unaccompanied). Specialist UASC project officer. We have increased the availability of clinicians and UASC experts within the service who can directly see UASC children and young people, skill up the workforce and strategically work with other agencies to improve the lives of UASC. We have also met with the Home Office regarding the high numbers of UASC in care and the need to share the delivery of services with all Local Authorities.

### 3.3 Trend in the next 12 months

We are expecting that the complexity of issues for children and families to be sustained given the impact of Covid 19 and the cost of living crisis. Whilst poverty isn't an indication in itself of abuse and neglect, living in poverty is more likely to be associated with parental mental health, parental substance misuse and domestic violence all which in turn mean that children are likely to suffer harm. Our service over the last year has been successful in reducing the numbers of children looked after from 401 (at a peak in August 2022) to 329 (March 2023). The trend is expected to continue with the average number of children needing to come into care per month reducing.

The mitigations in place continue to reduce some of the risks however the national placement sufficiency crisis is expected to be present in our society for the foreseeable future and National Reforms have not had the expected impact.

## 4 Implications

### 4.1 Financial Implications

- 4.2 There are no financial implications arising from this report. However, it's important to bring to the Committee's attention that the Children's Social Care placements budget was £19.2m in 2022/23 and overspent by £1.053m due to elevated level of demand for provision. The main drivers of the cost pressures are delays to care proceedings and a shortage of permanent accommodation for care leavers. The budgets for fostering and supported accommodation in particular are under significant pressure. While delays to care proceedings are reducing, demand pressures are expected to remain into the future. The unit costs of meeting provision are also increasing due to inflationary pressures in the current fiscal environment.
- 4.3 There was also a £0.587 overspend in 2022/23 due to the cost of packages that support children at home to avoid them coming into care or whilst we wait for a placement to materialise. Approximately 70% of this pressure is driven by court ordered taxi transport to schools.

### 5 Legal Implications

- 5.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report. Legal advice and support will be provided, where necessary, in relation to individual risks as risks are identified.

### 5.2 Environmental implications and contribution to achieving a net zero carbon Islington by 2030

- 5.3 There are no environmental implicating arising from the recommendations in this report.

### 6.0 Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.1 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.

- 6.2 An Equalities Impact Assessment is not required in relation to this report, because the recommendation being sought does not have direct impacts on residents.

## **7 Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

- 7.1 The Committee is asked to note the risk management strategy for this Principal Risk.

### **Appendices:**

- Appendix 1 – Risk on a Page: Safeguarding Children

### **Final report clearance:**

Signed by:

**Corporate Director of Children's Services**

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**Appendix 1: Risk on a page – Safeguarding Children** (Extract from Principal Report)

<b>Risk Information</b> <b>Risk Title – 17. Safeguarding Children</b>	<b>Risk Scores</b>	<b>Existing Controls</b>
<p><b>Risk</b></p> <p>Safeguarding practice and provision for children and young people are ineffective to current and new familial and extra familial risks</p> <p><b>Cause</b></p> <p>Non-compliance with procedures, safeguarding practice and provision for children and young people are ineffective to current and new risks, lack of suitable trained and recruited staff, increase in demand</p> <p><b>Consequence</b></p> <p>Significant harm to a child(ren), death of a child</p> <p><b>Risk Update:</b></p> <p>The complexity of need has increased overall, and the service has also seen an increase in demand in some areas. A particular challenge since end of 2021 has been the increasing needs of unaccompanied children.</p> <p>Pressures due to Covid-19 impact on health staff, Brexit and cost of living crisis is creating difficulties in the recruitment market for social workers and staff in residential care settings. The Council continues to work with stakeholders to address recruitment challenges. Despite these challenges, the Council has consistently maintained staffing levels where we are able to respond to safeguarding concerns and comply with procedures.</p>	<p><b>Current Score:</b></p> <p>L:2</p> <p>I:5</p> <p><b>Target Score:</b></p> <p>L:2</p> <p>I:5</p> <p><b>Gap to target:</b></p> <p>L:0</p> <p>I:0</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Robust Quality Assurance and monitoring processes in place.</li> <li>2. Training and development processes in place which give ongoing assurance regarding quality of work and adherence to legal framework</li> <li>3. Workforce strategy in place.</li> <li>4. Close liaison with family courts to ensure cases which can be heard progress to final hearing, so children are afforded permanency.</li> <li>5. Placements sufficiency strategy (additional resources in our placement team and working regionally to devise solutions).</li> <li>6. Increased mental health and clinical support in care leaving service for UASC children (unaccompanied). Specialist UASC project officer.</li> </ol>

<p>The cost-of-living crisis is causing increased pressures on families which is manifesting in increasing cases of domestic violence, mental health and contextual safeguarding risks.</p> <p>New legislation on unregulated accommodation for children in care is coming into force in August and is likely to further heighten the lack of suitable placements for 16–17-year-olds.</p>						
<b>Action</b>	<b>Expected impact</b>	<b>Resources required</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Due Date</b>	<b>Status</b>	
Working locally, regionally and nationally to address the challenges in social care staff recruitment.	Reduce likelihood and impact	Staff/Finance	J. Abbey	Ongoing	In Progress	
Working locally, regionally and nationally to alleviate the lack of care placements.	Reduce Likelihood	Staff	J. Abbey	Ongoing	In Progress	