

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date: July 2022
Report of: Jill McGregor – Corporate Director Children’s Services

Report Title

Update on Children’s Services’ Improvement Activity

Summary

This report provides an update on the progress of improvement activity within Children’s Services since the last report presented to Committee in February 2022.

The report details the actions and progress that has been made following the formal Monitoring Visit by Ofsted, on 10th & 11th March 2022 and some of the key activity and advancement of our Ambitions Plan.

Recommendation(s)

- To note the contents of this report and the work that has been progressed to date.
- To agree to receive further updates
- To offer scrutiny and challenge to the service.

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

Name: Jill McGregor
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Background Papers:

Ofsted Monitoring Visit – Published Letter
Previous Report to Committee – February 22
Social Care Self-Assessment

Please specify whether the content of the report relates to any of the following areas. If the report does not relate to an area just put N/A.

Corporate Priorities	N/A
Relationship to GM Policy or Strategy Framework	GM Child and Young People’s Plan
Finance	N/A

Legal	N/A
Equality/Diversity	N/A
Sustainability	N/A
Carbon Reduction	N/A
Staffing/E-Government/Asset Management	N/A
Risk Management	N/A
Health and Safety	N/A

Recap on Inspection Activity

Since Trafford Children's Services full Inspection under the *Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services Framework* (ILACS) in 2019, there have been 4 Monitoring Visits and a Focus Visit (considering our response to the pandemic):

October 2019 – First monitoring visit (with a focus on the Front Door)

March 2020 – 2nd monitoring visit cancelled due to the pandemic

February 2021 – Covid Assurance Focussed Visit that considered all aspects of CSC delivery and included an Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) for Education

September 2021 – Monitoring visit that considered children in need of Help and Protection (Child in Need and Child Protection). Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The quality of social work assessment and plans, to ensure that they are effective in meeting the needs of children who are the subject of child protection plans.
- The response to children who go missing, to ensure that return home interviews are completed and records of these contain information that will help reduce risk in future.
- Management oversight at all levels of social work practice with children, to ensure that work is effective and is helping them to achieve better outcomes.
- Senior leaders' understanding of the quality of social work practice, through accurate evaluation of performance information and implementation of an effective quality assurance framework.

March 2022 – Monitoring visit that Inspectors focused on children in care and ensuring that we were providing effective support to enable them to achieve better outcomes. This was with a similar approach to the previous visit in that inspectors wanted to consider the quality of assessments and plans but through the lens of a Cared for Child and the impact of managers to drive effectiveness.

All our formal assurance activity has included consideration of the quality of leadership and management across the service and corporately. Findings and the ongoing improvement work has been reported regularly to children's Scrutiny and this is the fourth such report to provide an update.

This report will summarise in detail the findings of our most recent monitoring visit

Monitoring Visit – March 2022

As outlined above, the focus of the visit in March 2022 was on the quality of assessments, plans and management oversight of the service delivered to our Cared for Children. Within this there was also consideration as to how the service ensures that permanence plans for these children and young people are progressed in a timely way.

As with all of our monitoring activity, Ofsted consider the impact for children and whether the practice and service offered is ultimately making a difference for the children and families of Trafford.

The methodology for this Monitoring Visit was in line with the ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Childrens Services) framework.

The whole process of a monitoring visit is over 12 days. The first 10 days are for preparation and also off-site activity for the inspection team where they consider evidence that is submitted. This includes performance data, audits and supporting evidence to outline progress in line with the improvement plan and relevant to the chosen focus area. Days 11 and 12 of the process are with inspectors on site. These 2 days are where inspectors meet with practitioners to discuss children and families and also there is time for them to sample some case records to test their key lines of enquiry.

The key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) for this monitoring visit were:

- The quality of social work assessments and plans, to ensure that they are effective in meeting the needs of children in care.
- The way in which all staff and managers listen to the voices of children in care, to inform individual work and wider service development.
- Management oversight at all levels of social work practice with children in care, to ensure that work is effective and is helping to achieve better outcomes.
- Senior leaders' understanding of the quality of social work practice, through accurate evaluation of performance information and implementation of an effective quality assurance framework.

The Findings

Inspectors found that services for children in Trafford have shown improvements since the inspection in 2019. Children continue to be regularly visited by Social Workers and that practitioners know their children well.

The impact of both the redesign and the start of embedding a new model of practice was noted to have impacted on some practitioners but Ofsted further highlighted that workforce stability was showing early signs of improvement, there remained some turnover of social workers and as a consequence this is still having a detrimental impact, on some children being able to build rapport and meaningful relationships with their social worker. Workforce stability and "Investing in our People" continues to be a priority for the service.

Ofsted commended the strength of the corporate and political commitment to improving services for children in Trafford. They saw that the corporate parenting board invites

feedback from children and receives detailed, well-understood performance reports and that board members appropriately challenge the service as a result. Most pleasing was that they felt that the impact of all of this on our children is starting to be seen.

The self-assessment of the Leadership team was found to be accurate, and the Inspectors continue to be satisfied that all of the appropriate plans were in place to address areas where there is more to do in order to offer children across the service consistently good practice.

Quality of Assessments

The feedback within the scope of looking at the quality of assessments was that there was evidence of some assessments that are comprehensive and carefully consider the needs of children. These were seen to be the most effective assessments as they support creating a clear plan.

Where children are in care proceedings the Inspectors found that these assessments were usually stronger.

Many assessments for children in care were reported to be sufficiently detailed and provided a clear focus for future work with them but some were not updated when circumstances changed which meant planning and decision-making was not based on their current needs.

The practice of having Child Impact Chronologies for every child is the desired goal as these support practitioners in understanding the impact of what life is like for a children rather than being incident focussed. The starting point has been that for any child requiring a child protection conference or a decision to be made at Legal Gateway meetings (to seek agreement that court proceedings are required) must have a Child Impact Chronology. The further roll out of this work is the next priority and there is more to do. As part of the Ambitions plan, there is a plan to roll out this approach to partners to enable them to evidence impact for children and this will help identify support earlier for children and families.

Quality of Plans

The inspectors found evidence that there is targeted strategic work that is reducing delays in planning for specific cohorts of children in care. This is linked to the work around establishing permanence panels to ensure there is a clear strategic overview of the plans for children and driving plans and practice forward so that those children, where it is safe to do so, have a plan of permanence achieved.

Children's wishes and feelings were found to be carefully considered when their care plans are developed and recent targeted work brought about an improvement in progressing permanence plans for some other children, such as those subject of a care order and are placed with their parents where we have seen over a 12% reduction in the numbers of children living with their parents under a care order.

Care planning for some children does take place but it is often reactive following an incident and/or where the placement is at risk of breaking down. Our approach is that care planning has to be regular and purposeful to drive the plan and respond to changing situations for children and their carers in a more proactive way. A care

planning framework has been developed and approved by the Senior Leadership Team. There will be a series of practice learning spaces in order to launch this.

Impact of Leadership and Management

The self-view described by Senior Leaders in context setting for this visit was accurate. Ofsted recognised that there is an effective performance management framework in place and senior leaders are held to account by a well-informed and committed corporate parenting board.

The local authority had recently completed detailed quality assurance work about the quality of visits to children and had started a programme of development work across the service. The impact of this could be seen in the improved quality more recently of some visits to children. They did report that whilst children in care are seen regularly by social workers, some visits to children still lacked purpose, and recognised that changes in social workers have an impact on the quality of relationships some children have with their social workers.

However, whilst Ofsted recognised this progress, they also identified areas for further improvement and strengthening of practice. In particular, there is a continued need to strengthen the consistency of our practice and the oversight and challenge offered through the Independent Reviewing Officer Service. We have commissioned the services of Jan Harworth (Emeritus Professor of Child Welfare, University of Sheffield) to review and develop approaches through systems and practice. A focus of this work will be developing the oversight and challenge of CP chairs and IRO's.

It was reported that most social workers for children in care received regular supervision, and that in meetings with HMIs they described this as helpful and supportive. Supervision of social workers by their managers was noted to be generally child-focused and future actions usually agreed. Often though, actions lacked agreed timescales, and this contributed to a lack of rigour in monitoring the impact of planning on children's outcomes. They recognised that supervision of Practice Managers also happened regularly, and senior leaders provide clear direction about individual children when needed.

There has been a dedicated piece of practice led improvement work on a refreshed supervision framework. There is clearly more to do in terms of building the confidence and skills to meet the standards we have set for ourselves in this. There are plans to work with our Strengthening Practice Partners to work with managers on coaching and mentoring skills and also to support 'how to have a reflective conversation' This will become part of a managers' package of development alongside the corporate offer, the leadership forum and leadership master classes that have already taken place from Strengthening Practice.

Progress Since Monitoring Visit

Cared For Children

A significant amount of work is currently being progressed under this aspect of Ambition 4 (*Our children will live safely and permanently with a family, wherever it is safe to do so*). In order to accelerate and amplify this work a dedicated service plan has been developed and there is now a new permanent Head of Service leading the service and implementation of the plan.

A key priority is the stabilisation of the workforce and, alongside the new Head of Service, a further 5 social workers will be joining the service through our recent recruitment and student / front line processes over the coming weeks.

The recent development and implementation of a tracker that enables every care experienced young person's circumstances to be seen at an individual level across an agreed number of measures, as well as aggregated level, is enabling the service to implement targeted approaches and strategies e.g. targeting and improving the frequency and quality of keeping in touch and interactions with our 19- 25-year-old care leavers.

This is in turn helping focus on key areas of practice improvement, 'Keeping in Touch', timeliness of pathway plans, reviews. The previously successful methodology of practice led improvement work using the data to target a thematic audit to get understand the quality of practice is being utilised.

In addition, the service has recently implemented a permanence panel. There is now a clear understanding of our cared for children and their journeys to permanence. The first permanence panels have taken place with clear identified children where an alternative to care has been identified through the application of an SGO. Proposals to embed this approach have been agreed at SLT and practitioner learning spaces are planned to support and enable practitioners in developing their practice.

Workforce Stability

Workforce stability remains a priority for the service, and it continues to be routed through Ambition 3 of the improvement plan under the action; 'Creating the Conditions for Practice to Flourish'.

Across the service, there continues to be a higher proportion of agency staff to permanent staff within the service. Whilst the agency rate is still higher than desired, and there is some turnover, 62% of agency work force have been with us for longer than 6 months. This affords a level of stability, and we are continuing to focus on supporting all practitioners and managers in their practice to ensure children receive a consistent service.

A key piece of work in this regard is targeting agency staff to join us on a permanent basis; holding dedicated session on the benefits of permanent employment and working with all staff on how to say goodbye and manage endings in way that limits the impact on children and families. Strategically we have made the decision to offer our Strengthening Practice Programme to all our staff regardless of their employment status on the basis that they are delivering services and interventions to our children and families.

At a regional level work is ongoing to explore the potential opportunities and benefits of developing a bespoke Northwest 'not for profit agency.' There are a number of agency members of staff who have been with the service for longer periods of time which is conversely creating an element of stability. It is important to note that there is a regional and national issue with social work recruitment

The strategic approach to the recruitment and retention of staff is detailed through the Investing in Our People strategy and action plan.

As previously reported to committee, last year we commenced a 3-year programme with our new relational practice partner, Strengthening Practice, which is a crucial element to both our workforce stability and improving the quality of practice. Initially the programme had a focus on the wellbeing and care of staff as they went through a restructure and continued to provide services in the context of the pandemic. However, the programme has now progressed to 'Core Skills element with a clear focus on practice. The first module is 'Strengthening Assessment', and this started on 18 May 2022 with the seminars and then followed by 2-day workshops. The feedback so far has been incredibly positive from practitioners and Strengthening Practice with good attendance and engagement to date. There are 3 more workshops over the next 3 weeks.

The bespoke nature of the programme means that it can be adapted to any emerging themes or areas of focus and work is ongoing with the team to consider how we can incorporate the recent learning from our two published Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews to support embedding the learning into practice across the whole service.

Another significant piece of work is in the development of a Childrens Social Work academy. An academy approach will bring together the multiple strands of work that are already in place and will strengthen our offer to our workforce. Workforce development and opportunities will be a key factor alongside the career pathways into social work and beyond. It is envisaged that a draft proposal will be presented as part of ambition 3 in September.

Quality of Practice

Our strengthened quality assurance arrangements continue to evidence that practice is improving, and this combined with our use of dedicated performance tracking reports is enabling a targeted approach to be adopted where there is greatest need.

Throughout the year, there has been a consistent reduction each quarter in the number of case files where the quality of practice is judged to be inadequate judgements, with an increase in those audits where the practice is considered to be good and also an increase in good judgements in quarters 2 and 4. The area that has improved consistently over the reporting year has been in the assessments of children and families. Planning is starting to see improvements also. It is envisaged that with the focus and support of Strengthening Practice in these key areas, this will continue to improve and then directly link to improved outcomes for children.

Self-Assessment & Annual Conversation

In May, the service had its Annual Conversation with Ofsted. The Annual Conversation is a formal part of inspection activity and helps to inform KLOE's for any inspection activity including the full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS). As part of this process the Services Self-Assessment was updated and was submitted to support the discussion and challenge. In addition to the self-assessment being provided Ofsted also receive published data so this can be reviewed to support the focus of the conversation. This was a positive discussion.

Some areas of focus and interest for Ofsted included:

- Re-referral rates and the level of confidence in respect of decision making and “what we understand about this”.
- The timeliness of social work assessments versus quality of assessments
- The numbers and reduction in Cared for Children in particular teenagers exiting care and whether teenagers exiting care are receiving the support they need
- Stability of the work force and what this means for children – whilst recognising the national challenges in this regard but wanting to understand what our high level of interim (agency staffing) means for our children.

The challenge and any issue arising from the Annual Conversation has been woven into our ongoing improvement work as appropriate.

Some of the areas of focus have been incorporated into the MV that is taking place on 12th and 13th July 2022.

Analysis and Summary of Position to Date

The external scrutiny that the service have been under during this period has provided formal confirmation that progress is being made, albeit not at the pace at which we would have wanted for a number of well documented reasons.

The Ofsted Monitoring Visit process works as an incredibly helpful tool in our Improvement Journey, and the level of feedback that HMIs provide us with during DCS touch points, and formal meetings with leaders, helps to shape our priorities for the next period, validate our view of where we are at, as well as highlighting areas where more targeted work may be required.

As we move out of the pandemic, and into living with Covid, it is pleasing that the frequency of our Monitoring Visits has now been able to return to that which we should have expected from the start of our journey. As the time of submitting this paper, the service had just received formal notification of the next Monitoring Visit will take place on 12th and 13th July, and the focus for this visit will be the quality and consistency of support and interventions to being on ‘Child In Need’.

Following this visit there will be discussion and consideration as to how many further Monitoring Visits will take place before re-inspection.

Background Papers:



**Feedback Letter MV
March 2022.pdf**



CSC Self Assessment



CSC Improvement

- Updated May 22.pptActivity Update Feb 22