

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Trafford Pandemic Scrutiny Committee
Date: 22nd October 2020
Report for: Information
Report of: Jill McGregor - Corporate Director Children's Services

Report Title

Update on Children's Social Services' Improvement Activity

Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the progress of improvement activity within Children's Services during the period of January to October 2020. It aims to provide assurance to the committee regarding the progress and developments that are being made within the service and of the level of management grip and safeguarding practice across the service, with particular reference to the challenges and response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background

Children's Social Care Services was subject to a full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) in March 2019, with the report being published in May 2019.

The outcome of the inspection was that Children's Social Care Services were judged to be Inadequate overall and significant deficits in both the management and leadership of the service and the quality of practice were identified.

In response to these findings and under the requirements of the formal Improvement Notice, an Improvement Board was established and a plan of action (The Improvement Plan) was submitted to the Department of Education. Progress against the plan has been monitored through the Improvement board. This has been maintained throughout the COVID period.

Initial actions and focus consisted of putting the right structures, systems processes and procedures in place in order to ensure that there the right "scaffolding" was in place to promote rapid improvement. A phased approach to the improvement work was outlined that included responding, strengthening

and embedding.

Progress was last formally reported to Children's Scrutiny Committee in January 2020.

As part of this step change a permanent Director of Children's Services (DCS) was appointed and took up post 29th January 2020.

This report will provide an overview of progress since that time and it should be noted that subsequent actions and progress have inevitably been impacted by the current pandemic and the need to respond to COVID.

Areas of focus during this reported period have included :

- Enhancing and Building the Leadership and Management Capacity
- Establishing key base line information and progress in respect of quality assurance work
- Refresh of the improvement plan to ensure the right actions are being taken
- Responding to Covid
- Progressing our Revised Early Help model at locality level

In addition external sense check of our position has been undertaken through Ofsted observations and reflections (this was following a postponed monitoring visit scheduled for March) and DfE 6 month review that was completed virtually in August

Ofsted Monitoring Visit

The second Ofsted monitoring visit, scheduled for March 20, was postponed due to Covid-19. The service had prepared for the visit, and information had been shared with Ofsted in advance. As this work had already been completed the DCS requested that some feedback from the observations and off site analysis that been completed by Inspectors was shared. Ofsted agreed to this and, whilst keen to stress their comments were not findings as they had not had the chance to triangulate their findings with practice, they did have a conversation and reflective discussion. This highlighted a number of positives

- Improved Governance
- Good Corporate support for service
- Evidence of Improvement at the Front Door
- Evidence of reduction in with caseloads (averaging 17 at that time).

However areas that they identified that needed to be progressed

- A cultural shift towards being more child focussed
- increased pace and traction to the pace of change
- The overall quality of practice.

In order to address the issues identified by Ofsted and as part of our ongoing improvement work a number of key actions have been progressed and central to this has been the refresh of Improvement plan.

It is important to note that Ofsted's comments were in line with our own self assessment and the baseline work that had been completed and as such the service is in a better position to strengthen the necessary changes as phase two of or improvement work.

Improvement Board & Improvement Plan

Immediately following the DCS taking up post, proposals were taken to the Improvement Board to refresh and revise the Improvement Plan, with a clear focus on impact and outcomes for our children and on practice.

It was intended that this plan would be co-produced through a series of workshops with the Board members, stakeholders and our staff. Unfortunately, immediately following the proposals being agreed, the country went into national lock down which impacted on how this work could be progressed.

In order to respond to this change in circumstances it was agreed that the Board would continue to operate with a reduced membership and revised terms of reference and set of performance indicators.

In addition a series of smaller engagement sessions have taken place to revise and refresh the Improvement plan. A different approach has been adopted to this plan with a move away from being focused on Ofsted recommendations to a plan that describes our ambitions for our children and what we hope to achieve in order to improve outcomes for them and critically what actions we will take to turn our ambitions into action on the ground. For each ambition a dedicated Lead has been identified and in this way we will both track and report against activity whilst increasing whole service whole partnership buy in. The revised plan was formally signed off by the Board in September and is embedded below



This new plan now reflects the scale of our ambition and it should be noted that actions in a number of key areas have already been progressed prior to sign off.

We have established a new Steering Group to help drive our strategy and to identify the interdependencies between our Ambitions. The Steering Group comprises our eight Ambition work stream leads and several other key stakeholders.

In addition we have revised the Children's Programme Management Office (PMO) that supports all improvement activity and the management of inspection activity. The team is inclusive of project management support and service expertise and as such provides practical support to sustain pace and traction to assist the service in driving forward the changes that are needed.

Leadership and Management

During this period significant progress has been made to build the leadership team and capacity within Children's Social Care and this will support a significant step change in addressing a change in culture and pace to our improvement work. This has included the creation of two key leadership roles.

- Strategic Lead Practice Improvement and Learning – that will have a focus on improving the quality of practice supporting managers and practitioners at every level. The post holder will be responsible for quality assurance and audit activity. The permanent post holder has successfully been recruited to and takes up their role on 25th October 2020.
- Strategic Lead Safeguarding – that will have a focus on the wider safeguarding partnership (TSSP) and the management of the Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Chairs.

These posts were previously combined within a single role. Separating out these vital functions will enhance the leadership capacity to drive forward the key changes that are necessary. Both posts will report directly to the DCS and thereby enhance the line of sight and grip to frontline practice.

In addition the Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care has retired and a successful recruitment campaign has been completed and the new Director will take up post on 2nd November 2020.

Whilst recruitment to these key positions has been slightly delayed as a

consequence of the Pandemic having a new leadership team in place will support the transformation that is needed.

Work has been undertaken to ensure closer alignment and working with key stakeholders and partners including the VCSE, health colleagues and schools. This is in the process of being formalised with a strengthening of the Children's Governance arrangements and in particular the strengthening of the Start Well Board. This provides the platform for whole system improvements for the benefit of our children and families. It is proposed that a separate update is provided to Scrutiny in respect of these changes. This represents significant progress in taking forward our system leadership.

Quality Assurance Activity

Throughout this period there has continued to be a focus on "what managers understand and know about the quality of practice and how they are improving front line practice".

Whilst compliance in respect of audit activity had significantly improved and reached a high in December 2019 it was recognised however that the quality of practice and the quality of audit work needed further strengthening and this was highlighted in the feedback provided following the cancelled Monitoring Visit.

An independent external consultant and former Ofsted inspector, was commissioned to carry out a targeted and detailed piece of work to ensure our managers had the practical skills and techniques to undertake case file audits effectively and competently and utilise learning to drive improvement . This work was undertaken used as a coaching and developmental approach to provide a base line of auditors' and moderators' skills and confidence (across the management levels and within the audit team).

A detailed action plan is being implemented as a result of this work, and forms part of the action plan for Ambition 1 ("Leaders and Managers at every level understand and influence practice to be consistently good"). In effect this is the cornerstone of enhancing practice as we are developing a consistent approach to audit and the link back to practice rather than a compliance approach. The Strategic Lead for Practice Improvement is driving this work forward. Two learning and feedback sessions have been held with managers. This work is critical to enhancing our quality if practice at the frontline and building confident, competent managers.

In addition we have started to introduce revised performance clinic arrangements at individual team and service level.

This work is being supported by a strengthening of our data reporting and enhancing all managers understanding of what the data mean for their teams /

service areas and critically the children they are working with. In this way we are starting to have a better understanding of the quality of practice and the actions that are needed to improve outcomes for our children.

The work of the IRO and Safeguarding Unit has been strengthened and ongoing service developments sessions are in place. The formal dispute and escalation process (that is statutory requirement) if care plans for any child are not meeting their need has been a key development. This represents an additional quality assurance development.

Whilst this work is pleasing and we are starting to see greater ownership of the QA agenda the quality of social work practice continues to be inconsistent and there needs to be a maintained focus on looping learning back to practice. Investing in the skills of our managers to confidently manage risk support the learning and development of their staff is vital.

Service Response to COVID 19 and Recovery

The Covid-19 related restrictions that Trafford has been subject to have resulted in the need to revise day to day to operational practice. The service has adopted a risk base approach to all work whilst maintaining a focus on improvement. A key aspect in this regard has been the revision of existing policies and procedures and applying a “back to basics approach” for all activities to ensure the safety of all our children. This included RAG rating cases in order to determine which children should be visited first and subsequently moving to a position of all children being seen. Our most recent Wave Report Data showed that 99% of cases have a review/RAG rating recorded since lockdown. Those with no review are children who have been adopted and are awaiting closure. 75.4% of children had contact with a social worker within last 4 weeks: 76% Looked After Children; 95% Child Protection; 70% Child in Need. There has been forensic monitoring of this and follow up actions with relevant teams and staff as seeing children and understanding what life is like for them is a key safeguarding responsibility .

In addition we have maintained all our reviewing processes on a multi-agency basis virtually in order to ensure we have the right plans in place for our children.

We have produced revised practice guidance and maintained essential service delivery throughout this period to support this approach.

Specific guidance on management support and how to support staff during this time has also been produced.

Twice weekly departmental Covid-19 meetings have been held to consider any risk and implications for our children, families and colleagues throughout

this period and any specific Covid actions that need to be implemented. This includes situational reporting to ensure that we have sufficient staff available for work on given day

Whilst we have tried to align Covid response with our overall improvement activity, inevitably there has been an adverse impact on the extent to which this has been realised.

Vulnerable Children and Quality of Practice

As detailed above we have continued to have a forensic focus on whether our vulnerable children have been seen and the nature of the visit.

In terms of children being seen since lockdown began, 98.9% of current open cases have had a level of review and Covid RAG rating recorded (as per figures submitted to the DfE, 8th September 2020). This includes all those supported at Looked after Children (LAC) and young people and children subject of a child protection plan.

With regard to child protection plans, at the time of writing, 92.4% of children have had a direct interaction with their social worker within the last 4 weeks and all have had an interaction within 6 weeks. Our exploration shows that of those over the 4 week threshold, all cases show levels of management supervision via reviews and core group meetings within the last 4 weeks.

In this way we have a level of assurance as to what life is like for our children at this difficult time.

This focus in seeing children and what we understand as to whether they are safe or not is part of our “back to basics” approach to drive forward the quality of front line practice.

We are now progressing to a more risk based approach with a requirement to visit children subject to a child protection plan fortnightly.

In addition, as part of our Covid response, we have strengthened our links with our schools and have implemented a system of notification and alerts should any of our children who are vulnerable not be in school. This has been an extremely positive development and has strengthened our multi-agency working and has led to a discussion and agreement as to whether there should be a multi-agency meeting and a visit to a child.

We have continued to monitor the demand and flow of work across all services and in particular our ability to respond to need at the Front Door (Trafford Children’s First Response Team). We have experienced a spike in contacts in June and July but this slowed down in August and September and in light of this fluctuation we are scrutinising our decision making at the front

door.

Management oversight of every contact and referral remains in place and we have seen significant improvements in respect of re-referrals with year to date, re-referral figure standing at 17.4% of referrals having previously been referred, compared to 31.8% over the last recording year. This is in part as a consequence of changes that have been made to recording systems at the Front Door and the reduced demand during the pandemic.

During the next reporting period we will also be introducing specific quality assurance activity in respect of our initial decision making at the Front Door.

The next area of practice that will be a focus is ensuring that children's stories and their histories are captured through a meaningful chronology is on file.

We will be introducing child impact chronologies over the next three months as a methodology to support this.

Placement Stability

During this period we have maintained a focus on placement stability and understanding our children in care's lived experience. It was recognised that during the pandemic there was likely to be some tensions and uncertainty for our children in care as a consequence of lock down and changes to family time arrangements, whether they could see their friends and family and changes within the schools setting.

35 young people in the current cohort of children in care have had 3 or more placements in the last 12 months. This equates to 9% of the cohort and is slightly lower than the proportion seen at the same point last year, and compares well to statistical neighbours. However we have identified a number of children (12 young people - 3.1%) who have had 3 or more placements this reporting year and in addition there have been 78 moves/ changes of placements in this reporting year to date.

We have also started to review our expectations and the level of visits that should take place to any child in placement regardless of how long they have been in placement. Changing this will support the development of trusted relationships with our children in care and enable us to progress a standard of "would this be good enough for my own child". A number of deep dives have taken place within the service in respect of the quality of recording of visits.

Further analysis is being undertaken to understand the multiple moves that have been experienced by a small number of our children in care and care leavers. We recognise that the quality of care planning, placement support meetings and the offer of support to carers are likely to be important factors in further strengthening our placement stability. The identification of the need to

drill down and understand the situation for individual children is an example of our developing quality assurance and management grip.

Actions that have already been progressed in this regards include:

- Placement sufficiency work stream and the tracking of external placement as part of our Covid and financial assurance mechanisms
- The Corporate Parenting Board holding development session to enhance our collective challenge an scrutiny
- Planned care planning work shop within the Permanence service
- Data cleanse and tracking in respect of visits to children in care and care leavers.
- Fidelity check with regards to the Kindle / No Wrong Door model and an extended offer from the Innovation Unit to support our work
- Strengthened tracking of children subject to care proceedings

Our audit and QA work would again confirm that we have more to do in this area.

Development and Implementation of an Early Help Model

We have continued to develop and progress our locality model of Early Help building upon the previous work that had been progressed, post inspection.

This work has been aligned to our Community Hub development work. Critically, the lead for this work was secured outside of Children's Services and so signalled our intent that the model had to be *community based* and distinct from a social care offer. The work has been supported and externally facilitated which has provided the opportunity to engage and co-produce a model across the partnership.

A core project team has been established to drive the work forward and this is inclusive of a former Head Teacher to be part of the core team. It is envisaged that this will further strengthen and support the voice of schools being fully incorporated into the design process. Initial design options and thinking have been presented to some members of the Start Well Board, The Early Help Board and we are now moving into mobilisation phase.

A third sector stakeholder group has been established hosted by George Devlin that is providing a vital link to this work and the Improvement plan.

Workforce

Workforce stability remains a challenge and whilst there was initial success in driving down caseloads we are starting to see some areas of the service where this is a pressure. This is both as a consequence of churn within the system and some work that has followed as a consequence of some demand

in the system.

To date, in spite of an intensive recruitment campaign, we continue to have a significant proportion of agency staff and have had very limited success in attracting experienced social work staff. We have however welcomed 10 newly qualified staff through our front line programme.

Two detailed pieces of work have been undertaken to help us understand the underlying issues and this has clearly identified number of themes that are currently being considered by the service. There is a clear need for our recruitment and retention to be strengthened. This will be a priority for the Strategic Lead Practice Improvement and Learning and the new Director. Stabilising our staffing will be a key enabler in our improvement work. Workforce stability and morale has been impacted by the Pandemic and issues of well – being and support have been continuously addressed e.g. the use of bubbles so that every team has the chance to come together and be supported; day to day communications - Whatsapp groups and the use of team meetings, kitchen catch ups etc.

In addition as a service we have introduced whole service road shows and a revised fortnightly newsletter that celebrates and recognises good practice as well as other support strategies have been utilised.

Throughout this period there has been a programme of support practice and learning development pods to provide managers and practitioners with the opportunity to have reflective learning time.

DfE Review

Throughout July and August 2020, the DfE carried out their Progress Review. They commented that “staff and partners felt the recruitment of the permanent DCS had brought an element of visibly stronger ownership, leadership and renewed direction.”

They spoke positively about a number of other improvements that they had observed, including:

- A shift in focus to making improvements child-centred which, we expect, will lead to improved outcomes for children and families.
- A strong council and corporate commitment to children’s services in Trafford which has impressed us throughout.
- A clear view of the immediate and longer-term priorities for improvement and the activity that is required at all levels
- Effective partnership working evident throughout the Covid pandemic

and partners keen that this is maintained and nurtured as Trafford move into the next phase. Both practitioners and team managers demonstrated a sense of pride in how the social care service, as a whole has responded to the Covid pandemic.

- A positive shift in culture amongst managers and practitioners with staff acknowledging the culture change needed and feeling confident that they are in a safe environment to constructively challenge each other.

They also highlighted the work that still needed to be done to continue to develop a robust approach to the use of data and audit, and around recruitment and retention.

Future Inspections

In August, Ofsted announced their interim plans for a phased return to routine inspections (following the suspension of routine inspections in March 2020 due to COVID-19) with inspection activity being stood back up as of September.

Under this revised methodology we will have a 'Focussed Visit' as opposed to a monitoring visit. This will have a similar scope and remit as a full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS). Ofsted have deemed this to be the most appropriate way to hold local authority Children's Services to account during the current circumstances. This will provide a whole service view of our effectiveness of keeping our children safe during the pandemic.

A key difference to this process is the inclusion of a Schools' Inspector who will focus on the Local Authority' response and support to vulnerable children – from an education and learning perspective.

The focus visit will not be a judgement inspection and we will receive a narrative letter subsequently.

Recommendation(s)

Scrutiny are asked to note the contents of this report and the work that has been progressed to date.

To agree to receive further updates and offer a level of scrutiny and challenge to the service.

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

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