

## **Cabinet – 12 September 2012**

### **Report of the findings of the OFSTED inspection of safeguarding and looked after children June 2012**

<b>Portfolio:</b>	Councillor R Andrew
<b>Related Portfolios:</b>	Councillor M Arif Councillor C Towe
<b>Service:</b>	Children's Specialist Services
<b>Wards:</b>	All
<b>Key decision:</b>	No
<b>Forward Plan:</b>	No

#### **1. Summary**

As part of a national programme, OFSTED undertook an inspection of safeguarding and looked after children's services in Walsall between 11 and 22 June 2012. The inspection looked at how the council and partners safeguard and support vulnerable and looked after children. Inspectors visited front line offices, reviewed case files, spoke to children, and young people, staff members of the council and partner agencies. The report was published on 31 July 2012. The report can be found online at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/local-authorities/walsall>.

The main findings are very concerning and disappointing. Out of a total of 22 judgements 8 areas of practice in safeguarding were found to be inadequate. While services to looked after children were found to be adequate overall with good features, the capacity to improve safeguarding was found to be inadequate. The Department for Education has indicated that the council will now receive an Improvement Notice which will outline key actions and timescales, as well as the expectation that an Improvement Board will be established with an independent chair. Immediate steps have been taken to put this in place together with improvements in front line practice and management decision making. The improvements to services will contribute towards the Marmot objectives of giving every child the best start in life, by building resilience and well-being of young children across the social gradient, and enabling all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives.

#### **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 That Cabinet notes the findings of the OFSTED report and the actions that have been taken in response.

- 2.2 That Cabinet approves the establishment of an Improvement Board to drive the rapid progress required through the improvement plan.
- 2.3 That Cabinet receive quarterly updates on progress made by the Improvement Board.

### **3. Report detail**

3.1 OFSTED inspectors identified serious issues which they concluded may leave vulnerable children at risk of harm. In particular, they highlighted a number of areas of serious concern including:

- Leadership and oversight by the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board
- Social work practice too variable and sometimes poor
- Risk assessment, care planning, partnership working particularly with the police not sufficiently effective
- Assessments not informed by chronologies
- Core groups of professionals not meeting regularly enough
- Child protection plans do not consistently identify risk
- Police are not consistently contributing to joint protection enquiries
- Management oversight and decision making inadequate in some cases
- Sometimes cases are closed too early or children left too long in risky situations
- Performance management and quality assurance is inadequate as senior managers did not have adequate information to inform judgments about practice and take the appropriate action
- Disabled children's needs are not always met or sufficiently prioritised
- Workforce planning ineffective as council had not been able to recruit sufficient experienced social workers
- Capacity to improve deemed inadequate as the depth of the problems had not been known therefore not acted upon

3.2 Nonetheless Inspectors also noted areas of satisfactory, good and excellent practice particularly within looked after children's services

- Most children and young people seen by inspectors reported feeling safe and 94% responding to OFTSED survey said they felt safe
- Most children seen by inspectors reported the care they receive was good.
- Children's homes, fostering adoption and children's centres inspected are all judged good or outstanding for safeguarding
- A good range of multi agency services to support victims of domestic violence are in place and preventive services are improving
- In the main parents and carers were positive about the support they receive
- Social workers report that Walsall council is a good employer which offers high standards of training and support
- Social workers have manageable caseloads
- Good examples of the involvement of children and young people are evident
- There has been significant service improvement in looked after children's services

- Children have good opportunities to make a positive contribution in their communities
- Looked after children's health is well supported

3.3 OFSTED has identified some areas for improvement to be implemented immediately, some within 3 months and one within 6 months. Immediate action has been taken to draft an improvement plan based on the areas of improvement. In addition immediate steps have been taken to improve these areas:

- Improvement in decision making and management oversight at the point of contact with children's social care (Initial Response Service) – Led by Head of Service , Initial Response Service
- Immediate action to improve and monitor of involvement of police officers and all other relevant professionals in strategy discussions and meetings - Led by Head of Safeguarding/Police DCI
- Securing appropriate police involvement in Section 47 investigations - Led by Head of Service and Head of Safeguarding/Police DCI
- Manager required to ensure assessments contain an explicit assessment of risk, are child-centred and include evidence of children being seen – Led by Head of Service, Vulnerable Children
- Monitoring is in place to ensure that assessments are of a satisfactory quality before being signed off by managers – All Heads of Service
- New format and training to ensure that child protection plans are focused on risk and are clear about what needs to change, and how this change will be supported – Led by Head of Service Safeguarding
- Ensure that core groups meet regularly and that children are visited with a frequency linked to the level of their need – Led by Head of Vulnerable Children's Service
- Additional support and experienced practitioner in the domestic abuse referral team (DART) to ensure it is appropriately staffed and resourced and to provide a consistent and good quality response to assessing the risk to children of domestic abuse - Led by Head of Service, Initial Response Service/ Police DCI

In addition following discussion with the DfE an Improvement Board is being established which will be chaired by an experienced independent person. The board is due to meet and approve the implementation plan imminently. The Walsall Safeguarding Children Board has had a development day to disseminate and discuss findings amongst partner agencies and inform actions for the improvement plan.

#### **4. Council priorities**

- 4.1 Health and wellbeing – services to children and young people, informed by OFSTED findings will improve safeguarding and promote health and wellbeing of Walsall children and their families.
- 4.2 Communities and neighbourhoods – improved services will ensure that communities have confidence in the service and children can be supported to become positive contributors to their communities and will help promote community integration.

#### **5. Risk management**

There are a number of risks to the required improvement in services some of which are not in the complete control of the council, for example national problems in relation to recruitment and retention of social workers, and the rising numbers of vulnerable and looked after children. The improvement plan will be risk assessed and this will be reported to the board.

#### **6. Financial implications**

There are resource and capacity implications attached to the implementation of the improvement plan. These are likely to impact the medium term financial plan. A resource plan will underpin the improvement plan, and will be reported to Cabinet, following which the medium term financial plan will be updated.

#### **7. Legal implications**

The council and partners have duty to work together to safeguard children in line with the Children Act 2004 and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2010. If the Council fails to comply with the Improvement Notice the Secretary of State has further powers of intervention to direct improvement under s497A Education Act 1996.

#### **8. Property implications**

None identified

#### **9. Staffing implications**

A number of staffing issues arise. Ofsted comment that the Council has a significant number of inexperienced staff. The issue together with the need to enhance training and development within the service will be addressed within a revised workforce plan which itself will form part of the overall improvement plan.

Following the resignation of the Executive Director (Children's Services), the Appointments Board interviewed for the post of Interim Director of Children's

Services. Rose Collinson took up post on 3 September. The service now needs a period of stability whilst progress is made on delivery of the action plan. As soon as it becomes appropriate, the Council will be recommended to proceed with a permanent appointment, following the necessary process.

In addition, the Assistant Director (Specialist Services) who had responsibility for safeguarding has also left the Council. Arrangements are being made for interim cover for this post.

## 10. Equality implications

Providing good quality services which safeguard children will help improve their life chances and enable them to make the best contribution possible to their communities. The improvements to services will contribute towards the Marmot objectives of giving every child the best start in life, by building resilience and well-being of young children across the social gradient, and enabling all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives.

## 11. Consultation

Many children, families, staff and partners were consulted by the council prior to the inspection and by OFSTED during. The Children's Improvement Board (LGA), and the DfE have also been consulted.

## Background papers

- a) Inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services (OFSTED 2012)

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Date 30 August 2012



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