# Safeguarding in Walsall

Report of the Safeguarding Working Group



To be presented to Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel on 16 May, 2013



# **Foreword**

Walsall received an overall effectiveness rating of inadequate by Ofsted in June, 2012 in relation to its provision of safeguarding services for children and young people. Since then a raft of changes have been implemented to ensure that services improve. The Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel have been closely monitoring improvement activity and provided robust and constructive challenge. Whilst receiving reports and updates is important and valued, the Panel indicated a wish to experience, first- hand, some of the changes for themselves and speak directly to staff. Members recognise that each member of staff has an important role to play in transforming the service to deliver better outcomes for the young people of Walsall. As a result of this each member of the safeguarding group opted to visit a social work team of their choice. This report sets out the findings of Members following those visits.

As the end of the municipal year is approaching the group recognised that its purpose must be short and well-focussed in order to make a difference.

The resulting report identifies areas of good practice and acknowledges the determination and commitment of staff who have demonstrated that they are ready and willing to change to make the required improvements. It also suggests areas for further improvement. A key message of the report is that Members and Officers alike are united in making Children's Services within Walsall one to be proud of.

The working group would particularly like to thank all staff that gave their time to assist with this process. They would also like to acknowledge the hard work, dedication and commitment, common amongst all the teams they visited.



Councillor Martin (lead member)



**Councillor Jukes** 



Councillor Cassidy



**Councillor Thomas** 

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# Introduction

At its meeting held on 12 February, 2013, the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel (C&YPSPP), considered an update on Children's Services Improvement Activity. Arising from the meeting, a working group was established by the Panel to consider safeguarding issues. The safeguarding working group's first meeting was held on 21 March, 2013.

# **Terms of Reference**

The draft terms of reference were considered by the working group and subsequently approved by the C&YPSPP on 26 March, 2013.

The objective of the working group was for Members to contribute to, challenge, influence and seek assurances on the improvement process.

The full version of the working group's terms of reference can be found at Appendix (1) to this report.

The working group was supported by two Officers:

Neil Picken Senior Committee Business and

Governance Manager

Sue Butcher Interim Assistant Director (Specialist

Services)

# Methodology

The working group held three meetings with the focus placed on understanding how social work teams are constructed and where they sit geographically within the borough. Visits to teams were also arranged. Each Member visited a different team to better understand the work undertaken and identify areas of strength and difficulty. The working group then identified key themes and produced a number of recommendations based on the information received.

# Witnesses

The working group met and discussed safeguarding with the following Operations Managers and their teams:

Dianne McKinley	Initial Response Service
Louise Watts	Adoption and Fostering
Alison Glover	Children with Disabilities
Karen Johnson	Safeguarding and Families Support

# **Report Format**

The report is a summary of the evidence the working group collected as a result of their investigations.

# Context

#### What is Safeguarding?

The definition of Safeguarding is enshrined in law (The Children Act, 1989). In short, any organisation which provides services to or interacts with children and young people must take all reasonable measures to ensure that risk of harm is minimised.

This may include all or some of the following:

- Protecting children from maltreatment;
- Preventing impairment of children's health or development;
- Ensuring that children are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care;
- Undertaking that role so as to enable those children to have optimum life chances and enter adulthood successfully.

Safeguarding also covers a wide range of activities and actions undertaken by a huge number of people, not least by parents. It essentially covers three types of activity:-

- Specific action to identify and protect children at risk (suffering or likely to suffer harm) i.e. direct or serious physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect and exploitation;
- Activities directly designed to identify and support children who are for one reason or another vulnerable to poor outcomes and life circumstances;
- Ways to improve the general health and well being of all children.

#### What is the Council's role?

Safeguarding is discharged by Councils:-

- ensuring that there are well trained specialist professional services designed to identify, intervene and protect children who are at risk of or are being harmed;
- ensuring the co-ordination of effective domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, learning disabilities and youth justice services for children, young people and their families;
- co-ordinating the provision of targeted family support services to children, young people
  and their families whose parental circumstances (such as homelessness, poverty,
  unemployment, physical or mental ill health) have an impact on the social, emotional,
  physical development and health of their children;

- ensuring there are strategies in place in schools and other universal services to address bullying, discrimination, and anti-social behaviour;
- ensuring that the environment that children live and play in is safe through providing good housing, safe roads and well cared for public spaces;
- caring for children and young people when they can no longer live safely with their families;
- co-ordinating a range of community based services for specific communities or groups such as black and minority ethnic groups, children and young people with disabilities;
- ensuring that safeguards are in place to protect children and families from inappropriate
  child protection interventions as well as making sure that interventions are not avoided
  for fear of being seen to be discriminatory for example in relation to specific groups in
  the community (such as black and ethnic minority families) or potentially vulnerable
  parents and children (such as those with learning disabilities or mental health
  conditions);
- being satisfied that the universal services provided for all children (early years services, schools and healthcare, as well as play, sport, and leisure services) are improving outcomes for all children, regardless of their circumstances;
- ensuring that local services implement safe recruitment practices and follow good practice in ensuring the good conduct of those working with children, young people and their families.

## Who does what in Walsall?

## **Initial Response Service (IRS)**

The IRS receives 'Contacts' from professionals, family members or members of the public. On the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2013 the council's Screening Team went live and now deal with all 'Contacts'. They will gather basic information and decide whether the 'Contact':-

- Meets the thresholds for referral (and so is passed on into one of three IRS teams), or;
- Meets the threshold to be passed onto the Children with Disability (CWD) team. or:
- Is passed to an 'Early Help' service such as Think Family or a Children's Centre, or;
- Receives no further action from Children's Services and is signposted to a more appropriate service.

The screening process should take no longer than one working day.

The managers of the IRS teams ultimately decide if the referral meets the threshold for an Initial Assessment (IA). An IA is a short single agency assessment and should take a maximum of 10 working days to complete. If the matter is complex a Core Assessment (CA) will be completed. This is a multi-agency assessment which should be completed in a maximum of 35 working days.

It should be noted that the new 'Working Together' Document introduced by the Department for Education (March 2013) moves away from Initial and Core assessments into one single assessment to be completed within 45 working days. This will need work to implement in Walsall as changes will take some time to embed and sustain as part of the improvement process

#### Recommended

1. That updates on the move to a single assessment be reported to the Children & Young Peoples Scrutiny and Performance Panel in the 2013/14 municipal year;

# Safeguarding and Family Support (SFS) Teams

There are six SFS teams. They work with children and young people who are:-

- In need i.e. subject to a Child in Need plan;
- Subject to a Child Protection Plan;
- Subject to care proceedings;
- Looked After either by parental consent (s20 of the Children Act) or as a result of being in court proceedings (s38 or s31 the Children Act);
- Being placed for adoption.

# **Looked After Children (LAC) Teams**

These three teams work with long term looked after children and young people in accordance with their care plans. The teams receive casework from the SFS teams and the CWD team.

#### **Transition and Leaving Care (TLC) Team**

The TLC team works with care leavers in accordance with their pathway plans.

## Children with Disabilities (CWD) Team

The CWD team works with children and young people who have disabilities. These children and young people will be subject to 'Child in Need' plans or 'looked after' (short term before being transferred to the LAC teams). Children and young people may receive respite care and short breaks.

#### **Fostering Service**

The Fostering Service has three teams:-

- Recruitment Responsible for recruiting and assessing new carers and supporting them through their first year as carers
- Placements Responsible for supporting carers and managing placements receiving referrals for children and young people needing placements and matching them with carers.

• Family and Friends – Responsible for assessing and supporting Family and Friends carers. (Assessments are usually contracted out).

#### Adoption Service (one team)

The Adoption team is responsible for recruiting prospective adopters and matching them with children needing adoption. It also provides an adoption support service - supporting families where children have been placed for adoption pre and post the making of an adoption order.

#### Safeguarding and Review Service

Walsall has 8 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) whose role is to chair Child Protection Conferences and Looked After Children Statutory Reviews which take place on a six-monthly basis. They also ensure that care plans are monitored and reviewed in a timely manner.

# Where did the working group visit?

The working group focused their investigations on four areas spending time with operations managers, team managers and social work teams to gather a broad range of information. Areas visited included:-

- Initial Response Service;
- Safeguarding and Family Support;
- Adoption and Fostering;
- Children with Disabilities

#### Outcomes

A number of themes emerged as a result of Members visits. All Members commented favorably on the passion and commitment of all staff and managers to deliver the very best outcomes for children. Legal services staff providing support to Children's services were also praised. The main themes are summarised below:

#### What is going well?

#### **Supervision of Social Work Staff**

Feedback from staff indicated that supervision is undertaken within statutory timescales. Relationships within teams were good with mutual support a key theme. Staff felt able to discuss any issues openly with both peers and managers as the need arose rather than having to wait for allotted supervision time.

Members noted that whilst supervision took place in a meaningful and timely manner staff still had concerns that, due to the pressure of caseload work, time to allow them to prepare for supervision was limited. Members were advised by management that staff within the Families and Safeguarding Teams were afforded a half day per month to prepare for their sessions. Some members of staff, whilst appreciating the gesture, stated that it was simply not feasible to take time out from their case work to prepare sufficiently.

#### **Senior Management Support**

Staff reported positive changes since new leadership arrangements were put in place in 2012. It was apparent that staff now felt there was a clear direction of travel and all agreed that Children's Services was now on a much more stable footing. Briefings and information dissemination sessions were seen as both positive and helpful and senior staff were more much more visible and approachable than was previously the case.

Members noted that the Children with Disabilities Team particularly welcomed further direct contact with the Interim Assistant Director and Interim Executive Director of Children's Services.

# **Training**

Reports from staff at all levels indicated that their training needs were being met with sufficient budgets in place to allow external training to take place. Prompts were provided by managers with staff feeling that they are being encouraged to keep up to date with relevant legislation and guidance changes.

Members were pleased that training is readily available but noted that the Children with Disabilities Team suggested that training to understand the needs of disabled children should be mandatory across all social work teams, rather than voluntary.

#### Management support to staff when advocating for Children

Common amongst all teams visited was the fact that staff were well supported by management when advocating for children. Without exception, managers were approachable and supportive. Differences in opinions did, undoubtedly arise however, management would always provide explanation and suggest an alternative solution with the best interests of the child in mind.

Members were pleased to hear that staff were supported and acknowledged the importance of management providing explanations when courses of action could not be supported as this provided important training and developed understanding and learning for staff.

#### Resilience of social workers

Many social work staff reported that the role of a social worker and its demands naturally require a resilient nature. The revised flexitime system has had an adverse effect as some staff reported that they now took annual leave to recharge rather than use flexi days (which have been reduced since the change in the scheme). Support amongst team members and a sharing of experience were of key importance in terms of resilience to all questioned and rated as being crucial. Staff reported that new working patterns and systems (revised duty and shifts within IRS for example) enabled them to concentrate on producing more thorough assessments on time – a key component in terms of resilience.

Members were encouraged to see that teams worked closely together, sharing experience and learning.

## **Encouragement to pay sufficient attention to wishes and feelings of children**

Social workers reported that they were encouraged and guided to pay attention to and understand the wishes and feelings of the child. Whilst incredibly important it was equally important to strike a balance between wishes and feelings and ensuring sufficient evidence was taken and recorded when and if a case reached the courts. All staff were optimistic that work would continue to become more and more child focused.

Members noted that there were issues in relation to Children with Disabilities when it comes to meeting statutory deadlines. Understanding the needs of children and building relationships can take longer due to the complex nature of the child and communication barriers.

#### **Legal Support**

A number of teams reported that the legal support they received was of a high quality and offered sound and consistent advice.

Members were pleased to hear that the work of Children's Services was well supported by the Legal Services.

## What can be undertaken to improve services further?

#### Flexi System

Concern about the flexi system was raised by every team visited. The flexible working scheme allows for staff to use hours worked over their contracted hours in a flexible way around core hours (10 - 12 a.m. & 2 - 4 p.m.) by coming in later, taking a longer lunch or leaving earlier. Staff can also take half or full days off using flexi hours that they have accumulated. The flexible working scheme was amended on 1 January, 2013 and reduced the number of days staff can take as flexi holiday within a flexi period (three months) from five days to two days.

All staff reported the loss of many hours' worth of flexitime as they were now unable to take flexi leave for more than two days in a three month period. This has impacted heavily on social work staff whose goodwill and commitment continues to keep services running well. Social workers are prepared to lose time to ensure work was completed but, in the medium to long term there is a possibility that this will reduce as working long hours with little time to recharge will inevitably impact upon morale. This could lead to higher sickness levels increasing the already heavy reliance on agency staff.

Members were concerned to hear that staff were losing significant amounts of flexi time due to the implementation of the new scheme. It is important to note that the flexible working scheme also allows for later starts, longer lunches and earlier finishes to use any time accrued, rather than taking full days. That said, given the nature of the role, such flexible working is not always easily applied which has resulted in significant accrual, and subsequent loss of hours worked.

#### Recommended

- 2. That detailed analysis be undertaken in relation to the amount of flexi hours lost by social workers following the implementation of the new flexi system and reported to the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel within three months:
- 3. That the Head of Human Resources reconsiders the use of the flexi system for social workers providing a report detailing alternative models which better meet the needs of the service to the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel within three months.

#### **PARIS**

Significant concerns were raised about the PARIS system. PARIS is the Council's computer system for social services and is seen as cumbersome and no longer fit for purpose. PARIS is now only used by a couple of Local Authorities. Management reported that some staff opt to keep manual records as PARIS is unable to support their particular role or need. This in itself can have serious implications in relation to robust and reliable recording of performance and quality data as it is simply not captured on the system. This is a particular problem within the Fostering and Adoption team. At management level PARIS is especially ineffective in terms of producing useful performance monitoring and statistical information. At all levels, it is difficult to track/monitor and review cases.

The working group acknowledge the difficulties faced by social workers and management in relation to the PARIS system. They remain concerned that the system hampers the ability of staff at all levels to accurately populate, report and monitor cases. The working group recognise that the PARIS support team are helpful and supportive and undertake to provide the best possible service with a system which has limitations. The PARIS team were praised in particular by the IRS team for their help in setting up systems to support the implementation of the screening team.

#### Recommended

- 4. In relation to the PARIS System:
  - a) An in depth investigation be undertaken in consultation with all levels of staff within social services to understand the limitations and potential areas for improvement of the PARIS system, together with costs for implementation of any improvements within two months;

b) That an options appraisal be produced and submitted for consideration by the Children's and Young Peoples Scrutiny and Performance Panel to include introducing an alternative system once the investigation above has been completed;

#### Caseloads

Manageable caseload numbers are defined within statutory guidance and are generally acknowledged to be around the eighteen-twenty two mark. Many staff, however, reported caseloads in the high twenty's with some reporting thirty or higher. Many Social Workers stated that caseloads were still too high in many instances – especially where particularly complex cases were encountered.

Members were advised of a workload weighting tool used to allocate cases to ensure they were balanced as evenly as possible between staff but noted that it was not as effective as it could be.

#### Recommended

- 5. That the workload weighting tool be revisited to ensure that it is fit for purpose within two months;
- 6. That the Children's & Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel receives regular updates on caseloads to enable them to monitor levels and assess the impact of the screening team in assisting teams to reduce the backlog.

#### Location

Children's Safeguarding Services social work teams are scattered throughout the borough. Investigations revealed that- services which have been co located appear to have developed better working relationships as a result. The overall quality of accommodation was very poor.

Members were particularly concerned about the accommodation for the Children with Disabilities Team at Pinfold Street and the Initial Response Service at The Quest. The Quest has a family room which urgently requires investment as it is an extremely poor environment for children and families who often use the room at times of great stress. The décor is dated, oppressive and unwelcoming lending the room a somewhat depressing air. The remainder of the offices within The Quest were not conducive to inter team working with small separate offices for teams and managers and lots of dark corridors.

In regard to the Disabilities Team both the building and office are deemed to be unfit for purpose and suffered from poor ICT provision with internet connections frequently being lost.

#### Recommended:

7. That serious consideration be given to the relocation of social work teams as many buildings are not fit for purpose;

- 8. That the Smarter Workplaces Programme Manager be requested to provide the short, medium and long term vision for social services offices accommodation to the Children and Young People's Scrutiny and Performance Panel within three months;
- 9. That the Family Room at The Quest be completely refurbished in order to make it more child friendly and welcoming thereby creating a good impression of Walsall Council at 'the front door';

#### Wider relationships between social work teams

There was very much a sense of services "living alone" as they each only seemed to have contact when cases are transferred. This can be source of friction and is not conducive to team working. It was suggested that work should be undertaken to smooth the transition of cases from one team to another as the need arises. Understanding around Thresholds and their meaning also needs to be streamlined between teams.

The working group suggest that work needs to be undertaken to build a Walsall community of children's services social workers who work together rather than in their quite isolated teams. In particular, further work needs to be undertaken with the Children with Disabilities Team, which had transferred from Serco to the council in 2012, to ensure that it becomes embedded and valued as part of the delivery of Children's Services as a whole.

#### Recommended:

10. That the Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) and Interim Assistant Director (Specialist Services) undertake to establish a social work community to develop understanding and communication between teams and services with a view to improving understanding around thresholds and reducing tension at transfer points;

#### **Use of Agency Staff**

With the exception of Fostering and Adoption the use of agency staff remains high making up as much as 50% of the workforce in some teams.

The working group value individual contributions of agency staff and accept that there will always be times when the use of agency staff is necessary, such as providing maternity/sickness cover. However the reliance of agency staff within Walsall is still too high. The use of agency staff is expensive and not ideal in terms of stability. Capacity building and retaining experience within teams is crucial to the success of the improvement journey. The working group accept that the market affords agency staff advantageous rates of pay and provides individuals the option to adopt a flexible working life but also recognises that it is important to recruit and retain well-trained staff on a permanent basis in order to ensure a stable service is delivered.

#### Recommendation

11. That further work be undertaken to better understand why agency workers within Walsall are reluctant to take up permanent positions with a view to ensuring that Walsall's offer is as good as it can be within the parameters of local pay and conditions;

#### Deskbound

Staff expressed frustration in relation to being "deskbound" across the board. However, staff also said that more time was available to spend time with children and families as a result of the new working processes and improvements. The volume of paperwork and duplication thereof was a common complaint amongst all teams visited. Laptops were issued to some teams to enable more 'at home' working which reduces the need for workers to return to the office to type up their notes.

Members suggest that issues such as duplication of paperwork are somewhat exacerbated by the limitations of the PARIS system. It was noted that whilst some teams had received laptops to enable agile working, many had not yet been allocated.

#### Recommended

12. That, in line with other neighbouring local authorities, all social workers be issued with laptops to enable them to work more flexibly as this prevents time waste travelling to and from the office;

# Relationships with partners

There were some elements of concern that relationships with schools etc may be lost as all calls reporting possible neglect or abuse are now being routed through the screening team. It was also suggested that further improvements could be made with regard to the relationship with the Police.

13. That care be taken with the implementation of the screening team to ensure that key relationships such as that between schools and the children with disabilities team are not lost;

#### One- off direct payments

The Children with Disabilities Team highlighted that the One-Off Direct Payment scheme generated a lot of work for Social Workers which was perhaps not the most effective use of their time as it detracted from their core role. Direct Payments are designed to support carers in different aspects of their lives, and to help ease some of the extra pressures arising from the caring role. In order to qualify for one of these payments, carers need to have had a carers assessment or review that has identified a particular agreed outcome, and plan of action.

#### Recommended

14. That the One off Direct Payment Scheme be revisited to consider whether it is best administered within the Children with Disabilities Team or whether alternative resources, such as the Welfare Rights Team, are best placed for its delivery.

# **Conclusion**

It is clear that great efforts are being made across the board to ensure that services for children and young people are improving. Strong leadership at every level means that staff are now provided with clear direction and focus whilst changes in working patterns ensure that time spent with children and young people is maximised in order to address wishes and feelings work. Having said that, whilst Walsall Council is clearly on the road to improvement areas of concern remain - in particular, the continued high levels of agency staff and a cumbersome computer system.

The working group wishes to acknowledge that much of the work required to significantly improve is complex. It also wishes to praise the effort and determination of staff across all teams and at all levels to deliver the best possible outcomes for children in Walsall.

It is hoped that the recommendations as contained within this report will help to reshape and focus attention on areas which will, once implemented, assist Walsall in delivering better outcomes for children now and in the future.

# **Recommendations**

- 1. That updates on the move to single assessment be reported to the Children & Young Peoples Scrutiny and Performance Panel in the 2013/14 municipal year;
- 2. That detailed analysis be undertaken in relation to the amount of hours lost by Social Workers following the implementation of the new flexi system and reported to the Children's and Young People's Scrutiny and Performance Panel within three months:
- 3. That the Head of Human Resources reconsiders the use of the flexi system for social workers providing a report detailing alternative models which better meet the needs of the service to the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel within three months;
- 4. In relation to the PARIS System:
  - a) An in depth investigation be undertaken in consultation with all levels of staff within social services to understand the limitations and potential areas for improvement of the PARIS system, together with costs for implementation of any improvements within two months;

- b) That an options appraisal be produced and submitted for consideration by the Children's and Young Peoples Scrutiny and Performance Panel to include introducing an alternative system once the investigation above has been completed;
- 5. That the workload weighting tool be revisited to ensure that it is fit for purpose within two months;
- 6. That the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel receives regular updates on caseloads to enable them to monitor levels and assess the impact of the screening team in assisting teams to reduce the backlog.
- 7. That serious consideration be given to the relocation of social work teams as many buildings are not fit for purpose;
- 8. That the Smarter Workplaces Programme Manager be requested to provide the short, medium and long term vision for social services to the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel within three months;
- 9. That the Family Room at The Quest be completely refurbished in order to make it more child friendly and welcoming thereby creating a good impression of Walsall Council at 'the front door';
- 10. That the Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) and Interim Assistant Director (Specialist Services) undertake to establish a social work community to develop understanding and communication between teams and services with a view to improving understanding around thresholds and reducing tension at transfer points;
- 11. That further work be undertaken to better understand why agency workers within Walsall are reluctant to take up permanent positions with a view to ensuring that Walsall's offer is as good as it can be within the parameters of local pay and conditions;
- 12. That all social workers be issued with laptops to enable them to work more flexibly as this prevents time waste travelling to and from the office:
- 13. That care be taken given the implementation of the screening team to ensure that key relationships such as that between schools and the disability team are not lost;
- 14. That the One off Direct Payment Scheme be revisited to ensure that it is best administered within the Children with Disabilities Team or whether alternative resources, such as The Welfare Rights Team, are best placed to deliver.