

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES AND TACKLING INEQUALITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Agenda Item No. 6
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Report of the Executive Director of Children’s Services

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OFSTED IMPROVEMENT PLAN

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To report to the Committee the Improvement Plan that has been developed in response to the findings and recommendations of the Ofsted safeguarding inspection carried out in August 2011 and subsequent diagnostic work.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to consider the approach being taken to the improvement of Children’s Social Care and the attached improvement plan.

The Committee is asked to consider its arrangements for monitoring the progress of the improvement plan and its work with front line Children’s Social Care Teams.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

- 3.1 The Sustainable Community Strategy identifies “Improving Health” and “Supporting Vulnerable People” as priorities. Improvement in Children’s Social Care is key to the delivery of these priorities.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 In August 2011, Ofsted undertook a follow up inspection of the Council’s arrangements for safeguarding children. The inspection followed a safeguarding and looked after children inspection in March 2010 which found that safeguarding arrangements were inadequate and an unannounced inspection in February 2011 which identified some improvement but also ten areas for further development. The inspection assessed the overall effectiveness of the Council’s arrangements for safeguarding children as inadequate. Capacity for improvement was assessed as inadequate and five of seven sub areas were also assessed as inadequate.
- 4.2 The findings of the Ofsted inspection have not been disputed and urgent action has been taken to secure improvement. The Council has received support for improvement through a sector led approach which has seen capacity made available from other local authorities or sector experts. The first stage of the work has been to undertake a diagnostic exercise of safeguarding arrangements and extending beyond the scope of the Ofsted inspection which focused on contact, referral and assessment arrangements. A separate audit of 190 recent social cases was commissioned by the Council and has been completed. The inspection report, diagnostic work and audit findings form the basis for an improvement plan which is attached at Appendix One. The plan incorporates the recommendations made by Ofsted following their inspection and is the version as at 31st October 2012.

5. KEY ISSUES

- 5.1 The improvement plan is a significant document that will change over time. It covers the breadth of the Council's children's social care responsibilities as well as those wider services that contribute to the safeguarding of children. The plan reflects the more fundamental review of safeguarding arrangements that has been undertaken over the past two months and therefore extends beyond the recommendations made by Ofsted. This has been a deliberate approach, learning from the problems that the Council has previously had in securing sustainable improvement in children's social care.
- 5.2 The improvement plan is divided into three periods and sets out immediate goals, goals for the next three months and goals for the next six months. Each action has a review date at which the action is expected to either be completed or reviewed.
- 5.3 It is recognised that there are fundamental issues to be addressed through the improvement plan and whilst this work is being undertaken, support still has to be provided to highly vulnerable children and families. Therefore, this is a period of increased risk. In recognition of all agencies have been contacted to remind them of the escalation process should they have concerns about individual cases. Capacity has been increased in the short term to alleviate immediate workload pressures. Management information on caseloads and timescales continues to be monitored on a daily basis.
- 5.4 At the heart of the plan is the need to strengthen social work practice in Peterborough. The Council employs some very good social workers but social work practice is too variable in relation to individual cases. The absence of a robust practice framework has increased the impact of high staff turnover, particularly at manager grades, on casework. The plan sets out actions that will clarify the expectations of social work practice in Peterborough, clarify thresholds for accessing services, strengthen the assessment of risk and protective factors in case work and improve the writing of case plans. These actions are essentially about ensuring that the core foundations of social work practice are in place. If they are not, then any subsequent improvement work is unlikely to be sustainable. The general approach to improvement being adopted is to take good practice strategies, policies and material from other local authorities and implement them locally rather than designing new arrangements for Peterborough.
- 5.5 The plan includes increasing capacity in children's social care in the short term whilst a longer term view is taken of required capacity. Good progress has been made in recruiting to vacant posts. However, whilst some high quality temporary staff have been recruited, overall there remains too great a reliance on temporary staff. This is a short term measure whilst permanent recruitment is commenced and a review of the required establishment for children's social care is completed. Additional capacity has also been made available to the contact centre and business support function to better deal with current demand levels and to address backlogs in work.
- 5.6 Significant changes in social work processes and arrangements are included in the plan. This includes improving arrangements for the transfer of cases between teams, business processes within the Contact Centre and arrangements for the notification and referral of domestic abuse. The current social care information system, RAISE, is not fit for purpose in that inputting to the system is an exceptionally slow process. As a consequence case recording is far too variable. It is planned to replace with the LiquidLogic product in April 2012. Opportunities for bringing forward this implementation date are being considered. If this is not possible then standard processes for case recording that recognise the delays caused by system will be implemented
- 5.7 The plan includes arrangements for improving performance management and quality assurance arrangements. The assessment of progress of previous improvement activity has been too dependent on a narrow band of quantitative performance indicators. Revisions have been made to both performance management and management information arrangements. Quality

assurance arrangements are being reviewed to better focus on reporting the quality of practice and reduce the emphasis on quantifying the outcome of quality assurance work. The audit of case work is crucial to assessing improvement progress and the approach to audit is being reviewed and capacity for audit work will be increased. It is vital that staff receive regular and high quality supervision during which they can discuss current case loads and issues. The importance of supervision has been underlined and arrangements put in place whereby managers audit a sample of supervisions on a monthly basis.

- 5.8 There is a clear need to improve safeguarding arrangements but this is not a task for children's social care alone. Ensuring that only appropriate referrals are made to Children's Social Care would improve overall capacity, hence the need to ensure that thresholds are widely understood and observed. Additionally the plan reflects work that will be undertaken with the Police to join up referral arrangements, through the Multi Agency Referral Unit.
- 5.9 The plan sets out the actions being taken to develop arrangements for prevention and early intervention focused services and to reduce in the medium and long term the volume of referrals to children's social care. Early and effective intervention delivers benefits to children, families and the Council. There are currently some very good early intervention services in Peterborough but they are not sufficiently aligned collectively and not necessarily targeted at children and families at risk of being referred to social care. It is proposed to bring all such services into one management structure and work is underway to develop more coherent pathways for accessing these services.
- 5.10 It is not yet known what action the Minister proposes to take following the inspection outcome. Department for Education officials have attended meetings to discuss the diagnostic work and its findings and have received draft copies of the improvement plan. The Committee will receive an update on ministerial action at its meeting. Arrangements need to be put in place to monitor the progress of the improvement work and its impact. An Improvement Board is being established and the first meeting will take place on 8th November. An independent Chair for the Improvement Board has been agreed with the DfE who will be Jane Held, a highly experienced and regarded social care practitioner, formerly Director of Social Services in Camden and a board member of several national organisations including National Children's Bureau. At its first meeting the Improvement Board will consider the information it requires to assess future progress. The Executive Director of Children Services also chairs weekly meetings to discuss progress with the improvement plan and any issues arising.
- 5.11 At its previous meeting the Committee considered how it could be better placed to assess the progress being made to improve safeguarding arrangements. A proposal to link the Committee with the work of the Children's Social Care through structured visits to teams is attached at Appendix 2 along with a suggested format for recording visits. It is recommended that a Task and Finish Group is established to undertake this work.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The implications of this report are city wide. It is imperative that the Council maintains an effective safeguarding children function. Additional resources have been made available to fund the short term capacity required in children's social care. Work is ongoing to identify longer term capacity requirements and this will be built into future financial plans.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The improvement plan has not been the subject of wide consultation; this has reflected the urgency of the need to address current safeguarding issues. The plan includes a number of actions reflecting the wider need to ensure that children and families participate in decisions affecting them.

8. NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 Any changes recommended by the Committee will be reflected in an updated plan. Cabinet

have asked to receive quarterly updates on progress.

9. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

- Ofsted Inspection of Safeguarding: Peterborough 6th September 2011;
- Ofsted Unannounced Inspection of contact referral and assessment arrangements 3rd March 2011; and
- Ofsted Safeguarding and Looked after Children Inspection: Peterborough 21st May 2010

10. APPENDICES

10.1 Appendix 1: Improvement Plan

Appendix 2: Proposed arrangements for Task and Finish Group visits to Children's Social Care teams.