

CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Report subject	Children's Social Care Improvement Journey – progress update
Meeting date	21 September 2021
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	Members received an overview report of progress at their meeting on 8 June and requested further updates in order to satisfy themselves that progress was being maintained.
Recommendations	That Members note and scrutinise the report and that any points and suggestions are built into the next stage of the children's social care improvement journey.
Reason for recommendations	Request by the committee

Portfolio Holder(s):	Councillor Mike White, Lead Member for Children and Families
	Elaine Redding, Corporate Director of Children's Services and Anthony Douglas, DfE improvement Advisor for BCP
Report Authors	Elaine Redding and Anthony Douglas
Wards	All
Classification	For recommendations going forward

1. Progress

- a. Previous reports to the committee set out the action plan and performance reports in detail, so today's report is a shorter report covering the period from the last Overview and Scrutiny meeting on 8th June until the end of August.
- b. Intensive improvement work has continued without any let up, despite significant demand pressures – see the Context section of the report below.
- c. We have gone back to the Areas for Priority Action identified by Ofsted in their last two focused visits to children's social care, which have been attached below for the convenience of members. We are satisfied that all priority actions have been implemented and that progress has been made on every single item of concern expressed by Ofsted. The remaining question is whether progress has been rapid enough and whether it will be sustained. A further focused visit and a full graded inspection by Ofsted are likely to take place between now and the end of the 2021/22 business year. They will of course reach their own independent conclusions about the rate of progress.
- d. Some key performance improvements over the period from the focused visit until the end of June are set out below to illustrate the changes. delivered so far, and those measures which continue to cause concern. The end of June was the last reporting quarter where a full set of data is available for scrutiny.

2. Improvements

- a. The timely progression of contacts at the front door by the MASH (the multi-agency safeguarding hub) has improved significantly over the last 9 months. In October 2020, 49% of contacts were progressed on time. In June 2021 performance rose to 93%. This is despite very high numbers of contacts (see context below).
- b. The timely completion of Children in Need (CIN) reviews has risen over the course of the last 9 months. In October 2020, 49% of CIN reviews were completed on time. This rose to 72% in June 2021.

- c. The percentage of repeat Child Protection plans has fluctuated over the last 9 months. It was 20% in October 2020 and is the same in June 2021, however, this has reduced from a peak of 39% in November 2020. This is a measure of whether decision-making about a reduced level of multi-agency concern is sound
- d. Placement stability for children in care has improved/remained stable over the last 9 months. In October 2020, 6% of children in care had 3 or more placement moves in the last year. In June 2021 this remains at 6%, falling from a peak of 11% in January 2021. For longer term stability, performance has risen from 69% to 75%. Both of these indicators come with the caveat that we have known issues with the timely recording of placement moves, although there have been many efforts to improve this over the last year.
- e. Education outcomes for CIC have improved over the 9 months. 14 Children in Care (CIC) are missing out on education (CMOE) in June 2021, down from 42 in June 2020. 100% of Personal Education Plans (PEP's) have been booked within 10 days of the child entering care in 5 of the last 6 months. The number of CIC not on roll has reduced from 21 to 10. 1 child was permanently excluded last year, none this year. However, fixed term exclusions have risen from 27 to 37, although both figures are affected by Covid lockdowns. We have not updated this to compare to 9 months ago because for the education indicators it is more comparable to use the same period each year.
- f. The number of children identified as at risk of Child Exploitation has fallen from 111 to 77, a reduction of 31%. This reduction includes the number suffering harm, which has reduced from 70 to 34. The lockdowns and closing down of public spaces may well have had an impact on the numbers. We are also working with the police to assure ourselves about the quality of protection made available to potentially exploited children and young people, as concerns about this were expressed in the recent inspection of Dorset police by their inspectorate, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS).
- g. High professional supervision levels have been maintained (97% in October 2020, 91% in June 2021). Case supervision levels have improved, although figures for June 2020 have now been updated to reflect delayed recording. At the time we reported 24% of cases had management supervision in the last 4 weeks (October 2020). In June 2021 this stands at 77% of cases. This shows significant improvement in the timely recording of management oversight.
- h. The number of children in care proceedings in the family courts has increased from 70 to 103 (a 47% increase). The average length of care proceedings concluded each month has risen from 26 to 34 over the last 4 months. This data was not available in September – November 2020. This increase reflects a clearer level of protection for children most at risk. That figure – and the associated costs - would have been much higher had it not been for the positive impact of the Edge of Care Service, which has kept vulnerable children and young people out of care. 63% of their interventions into families have been successful.
- i. There has been some improvement in inclusion outcomes, although this has been affected by Covid. The number of children missing out on education fell from 635 to 612 (4% reduction), although the number electively home educated rose from 476 to 594 (increase of 25%, although down from a peak of 679 in May

2021). Permanent exclusions in primary schools fell from 16 to 4, and in secondary schools from 45 to 41. NEETs remained relatively stable but continues to be high within the national context. We have not updated this to compare to 9 months ago, as for the education indicators it is more comparable to use the same period each year. Intensive work in this area will continue, using the outcomes of the Appreciative Inquiry into inclusion practices in BCP schools, which has been carried out by the Portfolio Holder, Councillor Nicola Greene and the DfE Adviser. A draft report is currently out to consultation with schools and will come to this committee and onto Cabinet in the autumn.

- j. Across the service in June 2021 the average caseload is 16 which is down from 17 in October 2020. Currently the caseload range is 6-28. There has been a recent reduction in caseloads in the Assessment service, about which there were serious concerns in July 2021 with caseloads there peaking at an average of 34 in May. The current average caseload in that service is 20 (August 2021).
- k. There has been a significant rise in auditing and quality assurance activity in the last 9 months. These have covered all front-line services. Generally, results are encouraging though concerns remain about the quality of some services being delivered. The recent SEND inspection shows how far we still have to go for example to produce high-quality Education Health and Care plans (EHCP's). The amount of auditing to establish the level we have reached is continuing. For example, a new audit of Pathway Plans for care leavers is going to be carried out imminently, auditing measures like whether there is an up to date and timely pathway plan?: is the young person's voice coming through clearly?: has the young person been seen in the last 6 weeks?; and is case recording up to date. The findings, as with so many audits and practice reviews recently, will help with practice improvement. The results of practice reviews are still not entirely consistent and further work is needed on the measures and the analysis of work. It often takes time for a new quality assurance system to bed in, so this is not unusual.

3. No significant movement or deteriorations

- a. There have been challenges with the timely allocation of children to social workers at some points during the last 9 months. The number of 'unallocated' children has also been exaggerated by worksteps in our main management information system, Mosaic, that have not been closed fully. At June 2021, 82 children were unallocated, compared to 100 in October 2020. In July this figure has fallen to 45 and scrutiny by Service Managers confirmed these are all children where worksteps are not fully closed but should have been. Within the Children and Families First service (CFF), there can at times be a period of a few days where a child is unallocated due to their social worker leaving. Improvements in supervision mean that Team Managers have a good understanding of the risk issues on remaining cases and can prioritise these children for visiting.
- b. Repeat referrals have remained high throughout the last 9 months. However, this peaked at 35% in July 2020 and the level has stabilised at 27% for the last 2

months, the lowest seen since October 2020. This has been largely attributed to the known challenges within the Assessment service.

- c. The timely completion of assessments has fallen over the course of the last 9 months. In October 2020, 86% of assessments were completed on time. In June 2021 this fell to 77%. This has been attributed to unprecedented referral numbers, instability in the workforce within the Assessment service, and a focus on quality of assessments. 3 Holding to Account meetings were held about the Assessment Service between mid-July and the end of August and the DfE Adviser who chaired these meetings confirms the necessary improvements have been made rapidly and the situation has now been stabilised
- d. The timeliness of child protection visits has improved over the last 9 months but not yet to target levels. At October 2020 this was 76%. Since that point it has fallen to a low of 70%, since recovering. At June 2021, performance was 82% - the timeliness of CIN & CIC visits has remained good.
- e. The percentage of children with a plan for permanence by their second Looked After Child (LAC) review – the statutory deadline - fell from 96% in October 2020, to 92% in June 2021. For all children in care it has fallen from 96% to 92%. However, some of this has been updated retrospectively. When we look back at what we were reporting at October 2020, it has been much more stable at 92% for all children.
- f. There has been an increase in children in care placed 20+ miles from home over the last 9 months, rising from 17% to 25%. This has been affected by Covid, difficulties in finding placements for children with very complex needs, and an increase in the use of residential care which also correlates with complex needs and challenging behaviour.
- g. There has been a fall in the percentage of children in care who have up to date health assessments (85% to 66%) and dental checks (45% to 25%). A new process to receive and input health assessment information onto Mosaic has been implemented very recently and is expected to improve performance. The timeliness of initial health assessments has very recently improved (0% to 88%), but this has been low for much of the year. As can be seen from this data, a lot of work on performance and the recording of performance is still needed.
- h. Some care leaver performance has deteriorated this year. We are now in touch with 79% of 17-18s and this has fallen from 97%. However, we are in touch with more 19-21s. Education, employment and training rates have also fallen for 17-18s (65% to 52%), but for 19-21s performance has been sustained. EET levels have been significantly affected by Covid. Suitable accommodation measures remain good.
- i. The timely completion of Return Home Interviews after a child in care goes missing has fallen over the 9 months, from 85% to 79%. The number of missing incidents has risen. This partly correlates with the impacts of varying lockdown restrictions.
- j. Workforce stability has been a challenge throughout this period. In September 2020 the agency rate was 27% and vacancy rate was 21% (October data not available). In June 2021 the agency rate was 37% and vacancy rate 27%. We remain well above the national averages for this which places limits on forming stable permanent teams and also has an adverse budgetary impact. Rectifying this problem is a priority going forward.

4. Context

- a. Children's Services has seen a significant increase in demand compared to pre-Covid levels. For example, there have been significant increases in referrals; in the last 9 months only December saw referral numbers below comparator levels. As a consequence, the number of children in need has increased by 54% over the last 12 months. Numbers of children on a child protection plan have also increased, reflecting the increasing complexity of the cases. However, the number of children in care has reduced following a strengthening of the decision-making and development of edge of care services.
- b. Demand and financial pressures continue to affect nearly all local authorities in relation to their children's social care functions. There are particular pressures because of the shortage of foster care placements and specialist residential care beds. BCP is affected by this, though does well for foster care placements and is less dependent on the more expensive independent fostering agencies than many local authorities who despite forming consortia, have not been able to influence the market.

5. Challenges

- a. The recent SEND inspection by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission, published on 31st August, shows the breadth of improvement work needed across Children's Services. The 3 main sets of services – children's social care, SEND and education – all need significant and progressive changes to be made. This is already stretching the available capacity and difficult choices will have to be made about the improvement priorities at any single point in time. The decision-making and governance structures are inevitably a matrix, given how many services are multi-agency rather than single-agency. At different points in the next few weeks, the BCP Cabinet, the SEND Leadership Board, the Children's Services Improvement Board and new structures like the proposed Partnership Academy Board (about joint workforce development across agencies), will all be meeting to take various aspects of improvement forward.
- b. Dorset CCG and BCP Council have been required to take the SEND improvements forward jointly and the recent inspection of Dorset Police which showed up weaknesses in their protection of vulnerable people, shows that improvements in services to vulnerable children, young people and their families are in every significant sense, a multi-agency improvement programme. Partner agencies have all committed to being part of the same intensive service improvement framework.
- c. The challenges of the Covid pandemic are still with us as we go into the autumn and then winter. It is probable we have only seen 'the tip of the iceberg' as far as issues like domestic abuse and deteriorating mental health are concerned. Many services are already either exhausted or depleted as a result of supporting local citizens during the pandemic. Fresh pressures will need even

greater resilience to withstand well.

6. Summary of financial implications

- a. Funding has been set aside in the current financial year for all areas in the Action Plan. A business case for additional funding to build up important functions like quality assurance and to buy in specialist training programmes is still being discussed with DfE as part of the Department for Education's support for BCP post-LGR. Whilst there are no guarantees, some extra funding between the coming autumn and March 2023 is possible. The wider context is that all the relevant Children's Services budgets are under long-term pressure, especially the Higher Needs Funding Block which is now being scrutinised by the High Needs Block Recovery Board and the projected overspend this year on the children's social care budget which is also being intensively scrutinized with a mitigation and recovery plan in place.

7. Summary of legal implications

- a. None arising from this report.

8. Summary of public health implications

- a. None arising directly from this report though improvements in all front-line services like children's services can have a positive public health impact.

9. Summary of equality implications

- a. Improved children's services make a positive impact to inclusion, equality and diversity by supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals and their families and preventing or limiting their adverse experiences. However, more needs to be done to review the impact of services on vulnerable groups such as BAME individuals, women and girls (in relation to violence) and children with disabilities, some of whom are waiting too long for a service. Most services making a difference to vulnerable individuals are multi-agency services so a major part of the improvement journey in children's services is to build strong external partnerships. Recent commitments by the NHS to strengthen joint commissioning and the positive response so far by schools to the Appreciative Inquiry about inclusion practices in BCP schools, are encouraging signs for the future.

10. Summary of risk assessment

- a. The major risks facing children's services are intrinsic risks to all such services across the country and wider. This is when services to individual children fail to protect them or when whole services are compromised

because of a systemic failure or failures. The risks associated with the improvement journey across Children's Services are that progress is not quick enough or not made at all in a key area. At present, the risks of this are assessed as low. The Improvement Board continues to review a short risk register at each of its meetings.

11. Background papers

None.

12. Appendices

Ofsted letters for focused visits conducted in 2019 and 2020.