

Report of the Assistant Director Children's Services

## **Overview of Children's Services**

### **Summary**

1. This report provides an overview of children's services using the children's inspection framework to set out what we know about quality and impact of social work practice in York and how we know it, improvements that are demonstrating impact and our improvement priorities over the next 12 months.
2. The inspection framework provides a useful lens for this approach as it sets out a national benchmarking framework for children's services.

### **Background**

3. In 2018 a new universal children's services inspection framework was introduced. This framework, ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) focuses on the local authority functions regarding the help, care and protection of children and young people.
4. This framework was designed as a whole system approach, to "catch services before they fall". This approach means that social workers are far more engaged with inspectors about their cases with the inspection team undertaking extensive case sampling.
5. The framework involves:
  - a. The submission of an annual self-evaluation by the LA
  - b. An annual conversation between the DCS and the relevant regional director, based on the LA's self-assessment
  - c. Up to two focused visits between the three-yearly judgement inspection, one of which may be a joint targeted area inspection (JTAI)

- d. Ofsted's local authority intelligence system using data to inform key lines of enquiry.
6. The local authority self-assessment is predicated on the following areas:
- a. What do you know about the quality and impact of social work practice with children and families in your authority
  - b. How do you know it
  - c. How do you plan to maintain or improve practice?

Local Authorities report that this new inspection framework is thorough and challenging, bringing a different emphasis and feel to the way children's services are inspected.

**What do we know about the quality and impact of social work practice in York and how do we know it?**

7. Over the last 15 months York has undertaken extensive work to understand the quality and impact of social work practice i.e.
- a. Delivered a live learning model of coaching and mentoring throughout 2019.
  - b. Introduced an audit framework and audit of 67 cases of open Children in Need (April 2019)
  - c. Commissioned an LGA peer review of help and protection services. (May 2019)
  - d. Established an improvement board and single improvement plan to scrutinise progress in delivery of the plan (June 2019)
  - e. Commissioned an external review of front door services and early help interface and implemented a multi-agency safeguarding hub (July 2019)
  - f. Undertaken an internal audit and external review of data accuracy commissioned and project accuracy board in place (August 2019)
  - g. Commissioned an external audit of 378 additional cases (August 2019)
  - h. Commissioned a regional sector led review of services for looked after children (Nov 2019)

- i. Appointed a very experienced Head Quality Assurance and Principal Social Worker (Nov 2019)

In addition Ofsted undertook a Focused Visit into the experiences of Children in Need of Help and Protection.

8. Key findings are that practice is variable across the teams and as such a significant improvement programme has been put in place. Whilst this programme is still in relatively early stages there is some evidence of improvement. This improvement has also been validated by external sources as confirmed by the most recent peer review and feedback from Trade Unions and staff.
9. The variable practice has been found to be longstanding in some areas. York had lost sight of what good quality practice should look and feel like for our children and young people.
10. An Improvement Board was established in June 2019 to grip practice and drive improvements. The Improvement Board meets on a monthly basis and is chaired by the Corporate Director of Childrens Services. The Improvement Plan sets out 6 key priorities for change, listed later in this paper.

### **Improvements are demonstrating impact**

11. **The relationship between workers and their children is good.**
12. Children and Young People report that staff members know them well. The U Matter Survey of the experiences of young people in care which was undertaken between November 2018 and January 2019 highlighted that 74% (42) of young people said they were happy with how often they saw their Social Worker.
13. When asked about their views on the reliability of their Social Worker, 75% (42) of young people expressed that they thought their Social Worker was reliable. This is an increase from both 2017 (54%) and 2015 (65%). This year's results also revealed that 77% (44) of young people felt that their Social Worker listened to them.
14. In the recent peer review of children in our care the voice of children was positive on files and reviewers found some excellent direct work with children.
15. **We know ourselves well and staff are enthused by the improvement journey**

16. The Local Government Association were confident that we are now a service which knows itself well. They validated our self-assessment. Senior managers know cases as appropriate and service improvement in key areas can already be seen to be having an impact. The focused visit identified we had an honest and accurate self-assessment and plans in place to improve.
17. The appointment of the DCS, AD and Head of Quality Assurance (QA) has created momentum and a clear direction of travel leading to better use of resources and confidence building across the workforce.
18. Staff continue to report greater inclusivity and welcome permission to innovate, challenge and contribute. In the most recent peer review staff talked of a breaking down of hierarchies and feeling more listened to.
19. The triangulation of recent scrutiny (externally commissioned Front Door Review, extensive Child in Need (CIN) audits, staff engagement events and partnership feedback) indicates direction of travel is welcome and required.
20. Work has been done with staff and partners to agree, practice standards, manager standards, a revised quality assurance framework, clearer scheme of delegation, re alignment of the front door and the development of a MASH, stronger case transfer protocols. The impact is strengthened practice through a comprehensive approach within an agreed framework.
21. **We have revised our recruitment and retention and are investing in our staff and culture change**
22. We have been very successful at recruiting new social workers and have developed a social work academy model which has received very positive feedback. The recruitment of experienced workers remains a challenge, not only in York but across the country.
23. Staff report they feel more able to undertake their roles and have greater clarity of what is required of them. We have strengthened the advanced practitioner role. They no longer case holding and are working to the Head of QA to support practice learning and development. The new Advanced Practitioner (AP) role is supporting practice improvement and ensuring audit drives practice development.
24. We have joined Research in Practice (RIP), a national partnership that supports evidence-informed practice with children and families. We are supporting staff to share learning and good practice and have developed a directorate newsletter and "let's talk about" lunches. A revised

supervision policy has been introduced and supported by reflective supervision training from RIP. We have also launched a leadership academy which has started with a leading practice programme for all managers.

25. We have a "grow your own" approach to workforce which has a number of elements:-
  - a. Focused recruitment of NQSWs
  - b. Over recruitment of staff
  - c. Frontline
  - d. Return to social work
  - e. Step up to social work
  - f. Social work apprentices
26. **We have introduced a performance management and improvement culture where staff are encouraged to learn and develop their practice**
27. We commissioned a live learning model with coaching and mentoring by experienced managers embedded alongside the teams to support them to learn and develop through their practice. This approach also supported the development and launch of six key documents that underpin our culture and practice:-
  - a. Scheme of delegation
  - b. Quality assurance and audit framework
  - c. Practice standards
  - d. Managers standards
  - e. IRO Escalation and resolution process
  - f. Case transfer between teams
28. We have introduced regular performance meetings to support increased ownership by managers of performance data and the use of this in their day to day work to support improved grip and management oversight. Managers are required to provide a narrative around key performance information relating to their teams including capturing strengths and areas for development. Managers have received training in how to use

the performance management system and the meeting also supports peer learning. They now get daily performance information for their teams.

### **Early intervention and community focus**

29. We are fortunate to have a strong communities and cultural offer in addition to early help and edge of care services. Multi agency and externally commissioned reviews of services have helped to develop a new Directorate plan, threshold document and early help strategy that build on the NESTA Good help principles to have a comprehensive programme of community based support which includes social prescribing.
30. **We have revised structures in some key areas to support a better focus on the needs of our most vulnerable children.**
31. We have changed the children in need model to strengthen social work oversight and created a dedicated court team. We have no cases allocated to un-qualified workers.
32. We have moved the management of the Healthy Child Service from the early help to the Director of Public Health. This is to improve the clinical governance of the service and also to ensure the Head of Early Help can have a stronger focus on the work of the Local Area Teams and quality assurance of them. The teams remain co located and work closely together in communities.
33. Re-enabled Health & Disability social work team to refocus on child protection and children and young people in care, moving this team back in to the main safeguarding service. Supported by a highly effective Advanced Practitioner within the Health and Disability service, children in need will now experience less handovers when need escalates.
34. We have a Missing and Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Criminal Exploitation single point of contact who will be leading a bespoke team dedicated to practice in this area and have introduced a revised multi agency child exploitation and missing panel co-chaired by Police and the Exploitation Lead. We are also delivering the Trusted Relationship Project for vulnerable young people at risk of criminal exploitation which aims to engage their wider family to keep them safe.
35. Our approach to restructure has been proportionate and the recent peer review found we had appropriately balanced the need to change practice and structures.

## **Corporate support**

36. Members and corporate leadership team have recognised the need for additional resource to support service improvement activity. There has been additional investment in the live learning model, audit capacity, and in business intelligence. We have also re graded the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) to give them parity with the team managers (their posts were downgraded in a restructure in 2016). The recent peer review demonstrated impact of the renewed IRO service.

## **Data accuracy**

37. The accuracy of data is of fundamental importance to children's services. The improvement board relies on accurate data within its scorecard to be able to understand progress and challenges in performance. In addition one of the first actions within an Ofsted inspection is the local authority being able to supply a data set known as Annex A. Annex A is a large child level data-set and gives a board first impression of the state of children's services. Because of its importance we commissioned a review of data accuracy and Annex A in 2019 and have a well-developed work stream in this area. This includes a development programme for all managers in relation to the use of the MOSAIC system and the use of performance data. In addition it also includes significant investment in the system, the development of which has not previously been undertaken with sufficient rigor.
38. The data quality within Annex A has improved significantly and is now within accuracy tolerance levels. There is further work to continue this improvement across all data lists contained within Annex A.

## **Our improvement priorities for the next 12 months**

### **Achieving a consistent approach to practice**

39. As stated practice in York has been highly variable, with an inconsistent over optimistic understanding of what good practice looks like. The initial reviews of social work practice undertaken by the new leadership team highlighted longstanding and embedded practice challenges. There has been significant drift and delay for some children including children referred to the front door, children where there is a plan of adoption, children who are subject to child in need plans, children where a decision has been taken to initiate proceedings and children subject to child protection plans.

40. We have seen the system re calibrate with a reduction in the number of children on Child in Need plans but a significant rise in both Child Protection and children and young people in care. These are young people who had experienced drift and are not receiving the correct level of service at a Child in Need level and as such have had to step-up. Numbers in these areas would appear to be levelling out. The most recent Children and Young People in Care peer review looked the 10 most recent children who came into care and confirmed the strength of decision making.
41. The newly introduced audit tools and QA framework must now strengthen standards of practice. We recognise that audit activity has been under developed in the service and that staff need support to effectively understand the quality of their work.

### **Tight focus on core priority areas**

42. The six key priority areas in the improvement plan are:
  - a. Strengthen the Front Door to ensure the rigorous application of thresholds and timely assessment of the highest standard
  - b. Ensure all children in need, children subject to a child protection plan and children in care have an up to date, outcome focussed plan and that children are visited in accordance with their plan, ensuring, as a minimum, adherence to statutory visit timescales
  - c. Ensure managers at every level understand their role and responsibilities ensuring scrutiny and oversight of the quality of practice in their teams
  - d. Ensure social work time is used to maximised outcomes for children
  - e. Strengthen our approach to attract, recruit and retain social workers to ensure a stable and confident workforce with a clear focus on reflection, learning and development
  - f. Ensure effective governance, scrutiny and oversight through the Children and Young People's Safeguarding Partnership, the Improvement Board and Senior Managers

### **Strengthening our Approach to Permanence**

43. The recent peer review of Children in Our Care has identified that we have the right plans in place for strengthening our approach to permanence but these are yet to demonstrate sufficient impact.



## **Safeguarding Partnership**

44. Whilst the Board was deemed to be Outstanding in 2016 there have been issues in relation to the rigor of the quality assurance of the Partnership and this was evidenced by the LGA Peer review undertaken in May. The Corporate Director has met with the Independent scrutineer and there will be a review of the overview and scrutiny the Partnership offers. A new partnership manager is also being recruited.

## **Key risks we face**

45. Staff recruitment and retention: recruitment of experienced social workers is a challenge due to a number of factors including, house prices and competition from local LAs who have received an inadequate judgement and are paying significantly higher rates. The Workforce Development Strategy seeks to address a number of these issues as City York Council seeks to become an employer of choice. Recent recruitment campaigns have attracted a much better level of application and we have been successful in filling posts at all levels.
46. There has been longstanding poor practice in York with many of the basic aspects of effective social work not in place. Whilst under new leadership arrangements we now have the correct plans in place and these are starting to have impact the pace of change has been necessarily ambitious. Sustaining and embedding this change is a challenge.

## **Recommendations**

47. This report is for discussion and comment, there are no options put forward for consideration. However, support from the Scrutiny committee is sought in the ongoing improvement journey for Children's Social Care.

Reason: To ensure the Committee are kept up to date with progress in Children's Social Care.

## **Council Plan**

48. The children's social care improvement plan directly relates to the Council Plan 2019-2023 priorities:
  - a. good health and wellbeing

- b. well paid jobs and an inclusive economy
- c. a better start for children and young people
- d. creating homes and world-class infrastructure
- e. safe communities and culture for all
- f. an open and effective council

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**Specialist Implications Officer(s)** N/A

**All**



**Wards Affected:**

**For further information please contact the author of the report**