

**Strengthening Social Work, Strengthening Quality Assurance:
summary of progress, impact and next steps
November 2012**

***'The robust approach to quality assurance is driving up standards.
This has made a significant contribution to the improvements achieved
in the overall effectiveness of safeguarding and
the distance travelled since ... 2009''
(OfSTED, November 2011)***

Summary

A year ago, OfSTED noted the positive impact of quality assurance in social care and safeguarding. This report reviews progress over the past year, examines the role of quality assurance in supporting ongoing improvement, and concludes by considering the next steps in the improvement journey for quality assurance and the wider service.

During 2012 the Council and its partners have invested significantly in further strengthening quality assurance. New processes and new capacity has been added to the case file audit process commended by OfSTED in 2011. Key developments include: the establishment of The Independent Safeguarding Unit, strengthened multi-agency audits led by Local Safeguarding Children Board, restructured management and Practice Observations in the Children's Social Work Services. Lastly, and importantly, the Council has opened up to a wide range of national and international experts, academics and leading practitioners to promote learning, support and challenge.

Quality assurance has continued to play a key role in supporting and informing the improvement of social work practice and safeguarding in Leeds. QA processes have supported change in key elements of the safeguarding system, including: improving front line practice and recording in social work through shared learning and the implementation of hundreds of corrective actions identified in case file audits; improving referrals and decision-making through the weekly referral review process; the review, refinement and relaunch of CAF in Leeds; and improvements to the management of regular, high quality visits for children and young people. The findings of quality assurance processes are also informing future planning, for example in shaping the 'Supporting Families, Strengthening Social Work' Action Plan; underpinning the practice development programme being developed with the University of York; and 'Turn the Curve' actions plans for priority improvements to social work.

Notwithstanding this considerable progress, challenges remain. Social work practice is improved and improving, but remains variable. Audits and other quality assurance processes indicate continuing areas for development in key areas. The main areas for improvement include: the quality of assessment and care planning; ensuring

regular high quality contact and involvement with children and young people and improving the management of joint working in Core Groups.

To help meet these challenges, quality assurance processes need to develop and change themselves. In particular, they need to be reshaped around the views, feelings and choices of children and young people to help give a better insight into each child or young person's 'journey' through the system of support, protection and care. As well as working to engage children and young people more effectively, quality assurance processes need to be more successful in engaging front line practitioners, moving from what can be a top down model towards one where QA work helps engage front line professionals in reflective practice, cooperation and leadership of change. Joint audit and quality assurance work, which is now developing well, needs to be extended to inform better cooperation between agencies. Lastly, more work is needed to share the information produced by audits and quality assurance and to use this knowledge more effectively to inform future strategies and plans for improvement.

Progress in quality assurance

The 2011 OfSTED inspection commended the quality assurance arrangements in Children's Services, and the extensive and robust file audit process instituted within the Council's social work service. This work has continued over the past twelve months, with over 1,000 case file audits undertaken by staff at all levels from front line social workers to the Chief Officer. In addition to case file audits there are various other key processes including statutory reviews; learning from Serious Case Reviews; statutory and local complaint processes; Regulation 33 inspections and the referral review process.

The Council and its partners have been determined to go further, and have invested significantly in improving quality assurance across social work and the wider safeguarding system. Key developments include:

- *Restructuring social work services:* front line management is a vital part of quality assurance, through the scrutiny, advice and support provided by team managers. This work has been strengthened through restructuring, with more focused teams split into field work and care teams.
- *Practice Observation:* senior managers now observe front line practice across a range of activities from key meetings to visits. This has recently been further supplemented by a trial of the OfSTED methodology for observing meetings and case files.
- *Quality assurance of supervision:* in the past six months the Children's Social Work Service has been trialling a new audit of supervision, supported by a detailed survey of front line staff to gather their views on their experiences and ideas for improvement.
- *Integrated Safeguarding Unit:* the Integrated Safeguarding Unit (ISU) was set up to bolster the role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and their independent scrutiny of practice and care. The ISU brings together IROs with wider quality assurance roles such as the Regulation 33 Visitor for residential care; and was designed to develop better working to involve children and

young people. The ISU has recently developed a quality assurance checklist for safeguarding which is designed to assess and improve the quality of social work practice and joint working.

- *The development of the role of Advanced Practitioners* who provide support and mentoring to less experienced staff to help them to consolidate and improve their practice. The work of Advanced Practitioners have been recognised positively by the Courts and CAFCASS.
- *Local Safeguarding Children Board quality assurance:* the LSCB has considerably strengthened its approach and has adopted a robust approach to assessing and improving multi-agency working. The Board has undertaken valuable audits over the past twelve months on child protection cases, restraint and Looked After Children.
- *Improving involvement of children, young people, parents and carers:* considerable work has been undertaken over the past twelve months to better engage children and their carers in assuring the quality of social work and safeguarding. These include improved arrangements for reviews and visits to ensure children are regularly seen and their views sought; surveys of children, young people and carers; input from the Children in Care Council (including recent meetings with the Chief Officer).
- *Common Assessment Framework audits:* the Integrated Processes team, who manage CAF in Leeds, have developed an audit approach that examines the way services work together to assess and support families.
- *Education and Pathway Plan audits:* over the past two months all Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and Pathway Plans have been collated centrally and audited by senior, specialist staff.
- *Commissioned academic research:* children's services have worked hard to open up to independent expertise, seeking input from a range of leading national and international researchers and practitioners. This has led to high impact work supporting quality assurance in key areas such as managing referrals, CAF and restorative practice.

These new developments have bolstered existing arrangements to assure the quality of practice and safeguarding, and together form an extensive, multi-layered framework to support better work with children and families.

Whilst quality assurance is significantly improved, opportunities for further development remain. Particular areas include:

- *Focus on the experience and views of children and families:* the Leeds CYPP and the Munro Review both emphasise the importance of the voice of the child in reshaping support and care. At present our quality assurance systems remain too focused on process and plans and, despite improvement, provide too little information on the experience of children and families.
- *Using quality assurance to engage and develop staff:* quality assurance processes have perhaps been too top down and have not properly empowered and engaged staff. To draw a parallel with our emphasis on restorative practice, more could be done to fully engage staff properly in sharing concerns and agreeing solutions. This is important in order to enthuse staff and support the Munro agenda of developing social work leadership.

- *Knowledge management*: extensive quality assurance activity produces a large amount of valuable insight and intelligence, but has historically not been used to its full effect. As mentioned above it needs to be shared more with practitioners to support reflective practice and staff development, but it also needs to be managed better at a strategic level to support and inform citywide strategy and planning to improve services and commissioning.

The Impact of Quality Assurance

This section of the report considers the impact of quality assurance. It reviews key findings, the actions put in place to address the issues raised and how these have improved quality and outcomes. Lastly it considers any areas that require additional work, existing plans and any further actions needed.

Early intervention

Early intervention is crucial to improving outcomes and to achieving our obsession of reducing the need for children to be in care. The central process for early intervention is the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), which brings together professionals in a structured way to provide help to children and families. In Leeds, the effectiveness of CAF is assessed through feedback from children and families, telephone evaluations and audits of a random selection of common assessments. In addition, in 2012 Prof. Mark Peel studied local arrangements for CAF.

Key findings: Strengths

- The majority of CAF cases are closed because the needs of the children and families have been effectively met
- Independent academic research praised the effectiveness of the Leeds approach to CAF and the commitment of local partners
- Most CAFs were fit for purpose and a significant number (c. 15%) were notable for their use of a positive, strengths based approach that properly engaged families
- Parent value support through CAF highly.

Key areas for development:

- A significant minority (15%) of CAFs were weak, showing weaknesses such as a negative approach, incomplete information or limited involvement of children
- National studies and inspection have identified variable practice in front line working such as family support. This is likely to be a shared issue for Leeds
- Further embedding the new approach to CAF
- Local and OfSTED assessments of Children's Centres is very positive – 82% are rated good or better by OfSTED

Actions undertaken

- The CAF has been simplified after the research and review earlier this year and relaunched
- Training has been undertaken, informed by the weaknesses identified in the audits

Further plans agreed

- Undertake quality assurance exercise of front line early intervention work by Jan 2013
- Implement process to share regular QA reports with frontline practitioners and engage them in developing improvements by Feb 2013
- An Assessment and Best Practice on CAF is planned for early 2013.

Referrals

Referrals are reviewed weekly by managers, advanced practitioners in a meeting chaired by the Chief Officer, Children's Social Work Service to assess and assure the quality of referrals and the decision-making and action taken in response to them. External support and challenge is provided by Professor David Thorpe and through a Front Door Reference Group established by the Leeds Safeguarding Children Board.

Key Findings: Strengths

- The quality of information provided in referrals is improving, supporting better decision-making
- The decision-making around referrals is improving, leading to better support for children and families and better risk management.

Key Findings: Areas for Development

- A minority of referrals are still weaker in the quality of information provided, or suggest that some individual practitioners need further support in seeking support and making referrals.

Actions undertaken

- The weekly referral review meeting continues to manage and quality assure referrals and decision-making. The meeting is chaired by the Chief Officer and supported by academic experts and performance management officers

Agreed Actions

- Additional information and support to provided to front line practitioners as part of Early Intervention Strategy and Communications Strategy

Assessments

Thorough assessments are fundamental to effective social work to ensure that the support provided meets the needs and choices of each child. As such the quality of assessments and needs analysis is a core part of the social care file audit process.

Key Findings: Strengths

- About eight out of ten (an average over 80%) of audited assessments met local practice standards.
- The quality of assessments is broadly improving, albeit at a gradual pace

Key Findings: Areas for Development

- A significant minority (roughly 15%) of assessments did not meet local practice standards, showing weaknesses such as limited involvement of the child, weaknesses in analysis and a lack of use of theoretical frameworks.
- Some case files showed weaknesses in management scrutiny and challenge.

Actions undertaken

- Social work service has been restructured into fieldwork and care teams, with specialist teams leading on managing assessments.
- Staff have received additional guidance and training on assessments
- The Practice Standards Manual has been updated and shared with all staff
- Corrective actions identified in case file audits or other processes have been addressed

Actions Agreed

- In partnership with the University of York Social Policy Research Unit, undertake a detailed review and development programme focused on assessment practice. To be completed by April 2013
- Implement new recording arrangements and training in support of new ESCR by July 2013
- Advanced Practitioners to provide ongoing support on assessment issues within teams

Support for Children in need of Protection

The Independent Safeguarding Unit (ISU) was set up as part of the restructuring of social care to provide stronger support and challenge to safeguarding practice across the city. Now that the Unit is fully operational, it is undertaking detailed audits of child protection work, particularly conferences, reviews and the operation of core groups. The findings are set out below.

Key Findings: Strengths

- The quality and effectiveness of conferences has improved due to the impact of investment in capacity and a more stable workforce

- The quality of Child Protection Plans is generally sound, with clear plans that set out roles, responsibilities and timescales.
- An evaluation of 'Strengthening Families', a restorative approach to child Protection, was very positive on its impact for children and families and better management of risk

Key Findings: Areas for Development

- In a significant minority of cases not all actions in Child Protection Plans had been completed within the agreed timescales
- The regularity and recording of statutory visits were variable in a significant minority of cases
- More needs to be done to ensure that the views of children are available to child protection conferences and inform decision making and plans
- There are issues with the recording and timeliness of core groups in almost half of the cases audited by the ISU

Actions undertaken

- Contact with all children with open cases have been analysed and all visits reviewed to ensure all are up to date and future meetings planned and agreed.
- The ISU has been set up to provide additional capacity for managing child protection referrals, meetings and joint working
- The ISU has successfully recruited full time permanent staff, improving quality over the early period where a significant proportion were temporary agency staff
- All social workers have been provided with improved, clarified guidance on managing Core Groups and Statutory Visit regulations
- Turn the Curve Actions Plans agreed with all senior managers to improve Core Groups and Statutory Visit recording
- The Practice Standards Manual has been updated and shared with all staff
- New ESCR agreed to support improved recording
- Corrective actions identified in case file audits or other processes have been addressed

Agreed Actions

- Agree and implement a 'Turn the Curve' action plan to improve the quality and timeliness of Core Groups.
- Agree and implement a 'Turn the Curve' action plan to ensure the regularity of statutory visits
- Further strengthen arrangements to involve children and young people in child protection case through the 'Strengthening Families' initiative and the recommissioning of advocacy services

Care Planning

Structured and specific care plans provide a strong framework to support meeting the needs of each child and young person. Care plans should be structured around the views and choices of each individual, and should be reviewed regularly to meet changing circumstances. Plans are audited through the Case File Audit process and also quality assured by Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) at statutory reviews.

Key Findings: Strengths

- 90% of care plans were judged by the IRO to reflect the needs and views of the child
- Nearly 90% (88%) of care plans were judged by the IRO to have an effective plan in place to improve outcomes for the child
- Over four fifths (average of over 80%) of care planning practice meets local and national standards.
- Case file audits suggest practice is improving, albeit very gradually.

Key Findings: Areas for Development

- A significant minority (about 15%) of care planning practice is weak and does not meet local standards.
- The child's views were not clearly evidenced in some care plans audited by IROs at reviews
- There are significant weaknesses in wider plans to support improved outcomes for children in care:
 - A significant minority of children do not have an up to date Personal Education Plan in place
 - A significant minority of children do not have an up to date Pathway Plan in place
 - One in eight (13%) of children and young people do not have a health plan in place

Actions undertaken

- All existing PEPs and Pathway Plans have been collated and audited by the Head of the Virtual College. Issues and updates required have been identified and will be fully addressed by December 2012.
- Revised, clarified guidance has been shared with all staff on PEPs, Pathway Plans and Child In Need Plans.
- The Practice Standards Manual has been updated and shared with all staff
- Corrective actions identified in case file audits or other processes have been addressed

Agreed Actions

- In partnership with the University of York Social Policy Research Unit, undertake a detailed review and development programme focused on assessment practice. To be completed by April 2013
- Re-issue guidance on Personal Education, Pathway, Health and Placement Plans and ensure all such plans are up to date by December 2012

Management and Supervision

Effective management and supervision is a vital part of front line practice and quality assurance. Managers need to provide support and advice as well as scrutiny and challenge to social workers to ensure that proper care and support is always provided.

The effectiveness of management involvement is assessed through file audits, management audits; the work of the ISU and through feedback from front line staff. These processes are less developed than other audit processes so information for this section is more limited.

Key Findings: Strengths

- Over four fifths (average of c. 83%) of management practice is deemed to meet local and national standards
- Audits suggest improvement in management practice over recent months, though the rate of improvement is slow.

Key Findings: Areas for Development

- Management practice does not meet local standards for management scrutiny in every case. This is in a minority cases, and is generally an issue with recording evidence of effective scrutiny,

Actions undertaken

- Restructuring has strengthened management through creation of more focused, local teams.
- Managers have been provided with tailored training and support through an agreed management development programme
- A management and supervision audit and survey has been undertaken to gather more detailed information on the development needs of managers in social work services.
- Corrective actions identified in case file audits or other processes have been addressed

Agreed Actions

- Further develop management audit processes by November 2012. Complete first audit cycle and staff survey and share results by December 2012.
- Use findings from audit to support and inform development of an enhanced leadership and management programme for all front line and middle managers by January 2013
- Implement programme from April 2013

Quality Assuring Quality Assurance

The findings of this report show that the current arrangements are very valuable in producing such a range of insights to inform improvement in our work with children and families. However, the report also suggests ways that quality assurance can itself be improved.

Key Findings: Strengths

- Extensive processes that involve professionals at all levels of the service
- Improved processes that provide stronger challenge and scrutiny, e.g. work of the ISU, new LSCB auditing processes, staff surveys
- Extensive evidence of corrective action to improve practice, care and support

Key Findings: Areas for Development

- We need to ensure that we deal with all complaints in a timely fashion as in some cases there is a failure to meet Council standards
- Need for further shift from audit of processes to an assessment of the experience of children and young people
- Improving but still limited processes for capturing the views of children and young people
- Applying the rigour of auditing social work practice to wider work – e.g. front line family support, other agencies safeguarding practice
- Need to improve mechanisms to collate and analyse information from all quality assurance processes to support and inform strategic planning, commissioning and service development
- Need to improve arrangements for sharing quality assurance information across the system.

Actions undertaken

- A new protocol for resolving complaints better has been agreed
- A national expert on quality assurance has been commissioned to work with us on reshaping quality assurance around the views and experiences of children and families
- Initial work to bring together findings from separate quality assurance processes has informed this report
- Quality assurance findings have informed the development of the 'Supporting Families, Strengthening Social Work' action plan, and in particular sections on staff, practice and leadership development.

Agreed Actions

- Agree new processes for strengthening the voice of children, young people and families by January 2013. To include involvement of the Children in Care Council.
- Pilot use of social work style audit tools in family support service and one other agency by March 2013.
- Implement a quarterly process to engage all quality assurance staff in identifying the key issues and actions to improve. Process in place from January 2013
- Pilot a new process to engage front line teams in using quality assurance findings to improve their practice and joint working. Pilot to be completed by March 2013
- LSCB to lead process to share all agency audit work on a regular basis by December 2012
- Review quality assurance framework, pilot new approaches and implement new approach by April 2013.