

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 11th November 2013

Report of: Tony Crane, Director of Children's Services

Subject/Title: Children's Improvement Plan Progress

1.0 Recommendation

1.1 Scrutiny Committee is asked to scrutinise overall progress, performance and issues arising against Cheshire East's Improvement Plan.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 This report gives an update on improvement activity since September's Scrutiny Committee.

3.0 Key Highlights

- Peer Challenge of ChECS was very positive
- Plans are underway for the wider Safeguarding Peer Review
- Cheshire East has been asked to take part in Ofsted's Improvement Support Programme Pilot
- Partners are engaging with improvements
- Children's Rights and Participation provider prioritising improvements
- Young person joined the LSCB and Chief Executive will attend 2 meetings each year
- Realignment of social care teams will improve service delivery
- New case management system provider selected

4.0 Key Challenges and Risks

- Recruiting high quality and experienced Social Workers on a permanent basis
- Capacity to take part in Ofsted's Pilot
- Ofsted's new extended framework goes live in November 2013

5.0 Peer Challenge of ChECS

5.1 A peer challenge of the Cheshire East's Consultation Service (ChECS) took place on 3rd and 4th October and the findings were very positive (Appendix 1). The 'Inspection Team', all from Lancashire County Council, were:

Tony Morrissey - Head of Safeguarding, Inspection and Audit (Lead Inspector)
Sally Allen – Safeguarding Manager

Andy Smith – Contact and Referrals Senior Manager

5.2 The team formed their judgements through case tracking and sampling 28 case files, interviewing frontline staff and Managers from ChECS and the Children’s Assessment Team (CAT) and speaking to a range of partners over the phone.

6.0 Ofsted Improvement Framework – Regional Pilot

6.1 Cheshire East is one of three local authorities who have been invited to take part in a regional pilot of Ofsted’s Improvement Framework (Appendix 2). The findings from the pilot will inform the final framework that will go live in April 2014. There are four main stages:

- A challenge seminar
- Monthly monitoring
- Quarterly review
- Annual review

6.2 The challenge seminar has been set for 6th December 2013 and the first monthly monitor day will also take place in December.

7.0 New Ofsted Framework

7.1 Ofsted launched the new framework for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. The framework is universal and brings together into one inspection: child protection; services for looked after children and care leavers; and local authority fostering and adoption services. A revised framework will be published before the framework goes live in November to include arrangements to judge the effectiveness Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) following a recent consultation.

8.0 Safeguarding Peer Review and Member Awareness

8.1 The date for a full peer review of Cheshire East’s safeguarding arrangements has now been set for the week commencing 10th March. An initial set up meeting with the Local Government Association is set for November.

8.2 The review will look in detail at the Council’s safeguarding arrangements, including interviews with Members.

9.0 Performance Book

9.1 The October performance Book (Appendix 3) shows that measures continue to improve in the main, with most indicators within acceptable limits and showing progress.

9.2 Issues around staffing have been reported to Committee previously. The priority continues to be around ensuring experienced staff are in post and vacancies are filled, so the use of Agency staff has increased.

10.0 New Social Care Case Management System

10.1 Work is continuing to accelerate the pace of implementation of the new Social Care case management system. Social Workers have been involved in the development and evaluation of the new system.

10.2 The Council has now selected the provider, Liquid Logic, used by the majority of local authorities in the Country. Implementation is planned for December 2013.

11.0 Feedback from the Improvement Board

11.1 The Ofsted recommendations around ChECS have now been signed off by the Board and the Peer Challenge of ChECS has confirmed that the service is effective in keeping children safe. The first bi-monthly audit of over 100 cases around ChECS was presented to the Board in September. Responsibility for monitoring the continued effectiveness of this service has therefore been passed to the LSCB.

11.2 The Board also partly signed off a number of other recommendations. Full sign off is dependent on the outcome of the bi-monthly audits to demonstrate quality of practice. A summary of quality assurance activity around improvements is attached (Appendix 4).

12.3 An initial meeting has been held with the Children Society, the appointed provider of the new Children and Young People's Participation and Rights Service. Priority will be given to work around the Children's Improvement Plan to embed engagement with children and young people into service development.

12.4 The new Children's Social Care audit of practice days, involving staff at all levels, were held in September. Feedback about the process has been very positive and there were again examples of really good practice, where children and young people have really participated, but also examples of weak practice.

12.0 Communication

13.1 A webpage to communicate improvements has been launched, along with a new regular newsletter for staff, members and partners (Appendix 5). Plans are underway to develop a wider communication and implementation plan.

13.0 Scrutiny Role in Safeguarding

13.1 One of the areas of judgement in the new Ofsted Framework is Leadership, Management and Governance. Within this judgement Ofsted will consider the

extent to which leaders, including elected Members have a comprehensive and current knowledge of what is happening at the 'front line' and how well children and young people are helped, cared for and protected.

13.2 Scrutiny Committee needs to assure itself that Members are aware of their safeguarding and child protection responsibilities – this was one of Ofsted's recommendations when it inspected the protection of children arrangements in March 2013 and was highlighted in the Safeguarding Peer Review in December 2012

13.3 There are a number of documents to support Members in scrutinising children's services, including:

10 Questions to ask if you're scrutinising services for looked after children (Revised 2012)

http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=dd2b4d45-a687-4c82-9737-fd31fb8a1c7c&groupId=10180

Safeguarding children – scrutiny guide (2009)

http://cfps.org.uk/includes/scripts/force_download.php?file=../../domains/cfps.org.uk/local/media/uploads/safeguardingchildrenscrutinyguide.pdf

13.4 Some areas Scrutiny will want to consider in more detail include how effectively Members:

- Listen to frontline staff;
- Understand the quality of social work practice;
- Evaluate the impact of the children's workforce strategy;
- Scrutinise the extent to which the voice of the child is central to social work practice;
- Understand the effectiveness of the LSCB;
- Scrutinise the extent to which outcomes for children and young people, including those in care, are improving; and
- Evaluate achievements of vulnerable children and young people

Cheshire East Peer Challenge Report

The following is a brief report highlighting the findings from our peer challenge visit which took place on the 3rd & 4th October 2013. This followed a set up meeting at which you outlined the following areas you wished us to focus upon as part of your improvement plan. The key areas of focus agreed were:

- Check that Cheshire East Consultation Service (ChECs), the new 'front door' into Children's Social Care launched on 22 April 2013, is safe following Ofsted's inadequate judgement in March 2013.
- Consider progress against the relevant recommendations contained within the Ofsted inspection report.
- Where possible comment on the child's journey to ChECS and partnership engagement.

In undertaking the peer challenge the following activity took place:

- Tracking of a range of cases
- Observation of ChECS – how it works
- Discussion with partners re thresholds/ChECS
- Focus group with staff in ChECS and the Children's Assessment Team (CAT)
- Interviews with managers of ChECS and the CAT
- Interview with family Information Service (FIS) Manager
- Review of performance data and audit activity

In total we looked at 28 cases, these ranging from decision making within the ChECS to case tracking from ChECS to the CAT and outcome of referrals sent to the CAT. The range of time taken on the 28 cases varied depending upon the deep dive we undertook on individual cases. Unfortunately we did not have the time to have a wider case discussion with partner agencies on individual cases nor speak to any children, young people, parents and carers in respect to any cases. In the main the categories of cases mirrored those Ofsted will consider as part of their new inspection framework e.g.

- All those who have been the subject of a contact/consultation in the three months prior to our visit
- All those who have been the subject of an early help assessment, a common assessment or a targeted intervention in the three months prior to our visit
- All those who have been the subject of a referral in the three months prior to our visit
- All those who have been the subject of a statutory assessment in accordance with section 17 or section 47 of the Children Act 1989 in the three months prior to our visit
- All those who have been the subject of a section 47 enquiry in the three months prior to our visit

- All those that were referred and closed or signposted elsewhere in the three months prior to our visit
- All those that have been re-referred in the three months prior to our visit

In reporting our findings we have considered the following areas:

- Effectiveness of practice and recognition and management of risk
- Compliance with statutory requirements
- Timeliness of response/quality of practice and decision making
- Quality of case recording
- Application of thresholds
- Quality of management oversight and decision making
- Use of support staff and level of training
- Experience and quality of staff
- Performance

Effectiveness of practice and recognition and management of risk

- There has been a significant investment in the ChECS which has a well staffed experienced team which includes experienced managers, social workers, support staff and business support.
- Risk and protective factors were well identified in most cases seen.
- There was good management oversight by Practice Consultants and clear rationale for decision making.
- ChECS has strong management which has a clear view on improvement.
- There remains an element of cautiousness in managing risk which leads to if in doubt send for an assessment. This has an impact on the CAT.
- Some cases seen required further consideration by senior management. These tended to be in relation to the CAT actions rather than the ChECS.
- There are positive links and ongoing support and monitoring for the CAF process from the ChECS team which is well valued by other agencies. This enables a more robust step down process.

Compliance with statutory requirements

- There are gaps in recording of basic details on the child's files e.g. GP, ethnicity.
- Recording of Sec 47 enquiries were not always evident and inference could be that the introduction of the combined assessment has led to confusion, but timescales are clearly different for completion of a Sec 47 enquiry and a combined assessment.
- Delays are being experienced by other agencies in some cases in receiving a copy of the consultation form.
- There is a need for clarity on when a consultation form is completed or not as in some cases they were completed and in others they were not. It would appear these are completed on telephone enquiries only.

- There is a need for clarity on when a child is to be seen/visited in child protection cases. The assessment framework refers to the child being seen in 10 days and does not distinguish between child protection and a child in need referral.

Timeliness of response/quality of practice and decision making

- The timeliness of response to referrals seen was generally good.
- The introduction of a duty rota to manage the inbox for the ChECS is positive and avoids delay and promotes the identification of risk early.
- The quality of analysis and identification of risk and protective factors is appropriately identified in ChECS.
- There was evidence of clear management decisions and identification of action to be taken.
- Partner agency referrals were variable and via a number of sources e.g. MARF, CAVA, Individual agency referral forms (NSPCC, Catch 22). It would be better if there was one referral form.

Quality of case recording

- As outlined in the compliance section there were gaps in basic details held on case files.
- The majority of referrals contained management comment, but there were a small number without any comment and there were inconsistencies in where these are recorded e.g. Case notes, Consultation Form, Supervision. The identification of one place to record management comment/decisions would be preferable.
- There was evidence seen of good use of case history and chronologies of case referrals within the ChECS, although the CAT felt there were times where this could be improved upon.
- There was not always evidence of relevant information being recorded on sibling records.
- The recording on the Consultation Form was good and this form gave a clear explanation of issues, analysis and action to be taken and a rationale for these decisions.

Application of thresholds

- We saw no evidence within the ChECS of premature closure of cases. In fact as outlined above the opposite was occurring with an element of risk adverse practice seen (if in doubt send for an assessment). This is understandable given previous position of premature closure of cases.
- The ChECS was clear regarding its role and that it was not there as a gatekeeping service for the CAT, but there to provide consistent and appropriate assessment of risk.

- There was evidence seen that the ChECS was looking to signpost referrals to the right place so that children, young people and their families received the right service at the right time.
- There was evidence of a proactive approach and good use of the step up and step down to appropriate services. This especially proactive in relation to the signposting or step down to CAF with the CAF Practitioner Support Officers providing robust tracking and supporting the CAF process with other agencies.
- Agencies spoken to felt that they had a better understanding of thresholds and in discussing cases with the ChECS this was a more inclusive approach to partnership working which was welcomed.
- Agencies felt that the Help and Protect Group was another example of good partnership working in enabling appropriate signposting of services to support families that did not meet the threshold for a social care assessment. It also enabled the group to hold agencies to account regarding commitment of services/resources. Consideration needs to be given in the future to broadening the membership of this group.
- The present PARIS system categorises the level of priority of each referral. A definition of the priority codes would be of assistance when monitoring thresholds.

Quality of management oversight and decision making

- As outlined above there was evidence of management oversight and clear instruction on action to be taken.
- There was evidence of quality assurance and audit by managers with the Group Manager in the ChECS carrying out 20% of audits of referrals.
- There was further evidence of audit via the deep dive exercise undertaken of the ChECS in June/July this year.
- We were also made aware of LSCB multi-agency audits and a supervision audit that had taken place, but did not check out the evidence around these.
- In order to further improve the auditing process we would recommend that an action sheet is added to the audit tool which clearly outlines who has responsibility for any outstanding tasks and by when.
- We would also recommend that any case file audits undertaken, that a copy is placed on the child's file.
- There is a need to strengthen audit in respect to the Family Information Service (FIS). We would recommend a random sampling of calls on a periodic basis that are not passed to the ChECS to assure yourselves that thresholds are being consistently applied in FIS.
- There was evidence of case tracking taking place, although we felt more use of performance reports by the ChECS to identify outcomes of assessments once transferred to the CAT would be beneficial. It was felt these should form part of the agenda at joint ChECS/CAT team meetings.

- Staff spoken to stated they received regular supervision and management is clearly visible and accessible.
- There was evidence of senior management oversight and the use of regular performance workshops was seen as positive, especially in being able to report to staff actions that had been taken from consultation with them e.g. You Said We Did.

Use of support staff and level of training

- There was good use of support staff in the ChECS, especially in relation to monitoring and support to the CAF and early support.
- We were informed that training is provided internally as well as via the LSCB. The performance workshops highlighted above were particularly well received by the ChECS

Experience and quality of staff

- As outlined above the ChECS has strong management and an experienced staff team.
- All posts are permanent and there are no agency staff within the ChECS.
- The FIS also has a stable workforce with staff being in post 2 years+.
- Practice Consultants in ChECS were knowledgeable and confident in their practice.

Performance

- The performance reports indicate that repeat referrals remain low which could be an indicator of appropriate decision making. Although performance in this area in March 2013 was also low?
- Since the introduction of ChECS there has been an increase in the number of assessments being passed to the CAT. This will have had an impact on the CAT at a time when they were dealing with a waiting list of cases. We were informed that the waiting list has now been addressed.
- The percentage of combined assessments being completed on time has increased since its introduction in July, but there is a need to monitor the timeliness of Sec 47 enquiries being completed.
- Maximum caseloads continue to be high at 33, but efforts have been made to reduce caseloads with some success.
- The percentage of agency consultations to ChECS by telephone remains slightly behind target, but good at 60%+

General comments/Recommendations

Significant investment has been made in the ChECS and this is showing early results. The team are clearly focused on improving performance and providing appropriate and timely responses to agencies and family members who contact them. Most of the agencies spoken to felt the new service was much better and that they were now able to speak to a social worker who listened to the concerns and offered appropriate advice and action, even if this was support for a CAF. It was only

the Police from discussion with them who did not feel much had changed as they saw their role has passing on CAVA notifications for the ChECS to decide on appropriate action. There had however, been delay in receiving CAVAs which has a negative impact, particularly on the CAT who then have to undertake assessments on information that could be weeks old. The quality of the Police information was also questioned by staff and is an area for partnership discussion to see how best this can be improved.

There is a need to consider in more detail the impact of ChECS on the CAT. There has been an increase in assessments at a time they were trying to address the waiting list and this may have had an impact on the timeliness, quality and decision making within the CAT. I would recommend that the forthcoming Peer Review look at this in more detail to ensure the improved quality of service within ChECS is mirrored in other parts of the service. I am aware of the proposed realignment of the CAT within the Child in Need/CP/proceedings teams and again the Peer Review next year would be timely to review the progress being made on the transfer of referrals to assessments.

Tony Morrissey
Head of Safeguarding Inspection & Audit
Lancashire Directorate for Children & Young People
8 October 2013

Regional piloting of Ofsted improvement work

This briefing is designed to provide directors of children's service with information about how the pilots will work and be managed.

Overview

Three local authorities that have been judged inadequate are being invited to take part in these pilots. Due to the fact that these inspection judgements were made some time ago, we are not in a position to start the improvement process in the same way as normally would be the case. For the pilots, we are able to adapt quite easily to help obtain a good understanding about how the proposed processes work. The pilots will replicate the four stages of the improvement offer which have been developed for inadequate local authorities. There is a principle that a local arrangement, for example an improvement board or equivalent, will be the forum to which findings and outcomes of each of the stages referred to below are reported. The board (or equivalent) will be responsible for developing and evaluating progress against the improvement plan and reporting to ministers and the DfE in accordance with the terms of the improvement notice and/or directions.

The four stages

- **The challenge seminar:** Three HMI who were involved in the inspections (i.e. one HMI for each inspection) and their SHMI counterparts will meet as a group to review the existing inspection improvement plans against the main findings in the inspection report and establish whether we agree with the priorities set by the local authority. This review will inform the local authority 'challenge seminar' at which the HMI/SHMI will use their findings to challenge the improvement board. Based upon the outcome of this seminar, there will be a number of defined improvement priorities populating a document that Ofsted will provide. This will be the focus of monthly monitoring and the meetings with the improvement board.
- **Monthly monitoring:** This will be structured to enable the local authority to report in detail to its improvement board on the impact of its improvement plan on the quality of service and the experience of children in a culture where accountability for delivery and constructive challenge is the norm. Emphasis will be given to the priority areas agreed at the challenge seminar. In addition, the HMI will have spent a day in advance of the board meeting auditing 5/6 cases that will be selected from current case loads ensuring that the case types will be relevant to improvement priorities. The audit will involve case file reading and purposeful conversations with front line staff and managers in order to evaluate the quality of practice, evidence of improved processes and practice as well as outcomes. The authority will have previously evaluated the same cases and submitted their audit reports

to us in advance. The outcome of this work will also be reported to the monthly meeting of the improvement board and will obviously inform our assessment of the authority's progress and 'next steps'.

- **Quarterly review:** This is the improvement board forum where the findings from the three monthly monitoring exercises and the work carried out by the authority are brought together to enable a judgement to be made about whether progress has been made, the pace is right and whether more needs to be done.
- **Annual review/inspection of progress:** So that learning can be used to inform the launch and roll out of the programme from April 2014, there will be no room for such an inspection in the first phase of the pilot process. However the pilot exercise could progress into a formal programme in April and such an inspection involving 3 HMI could then occur at the appropriate time. This inspection is not proposed to be a full inspection. Instead it will focus upon the improvement programme and evaluate progress. It will not report using Ofsted's usual four point scale, instead using a narrative judgement focussed on the nature and rate of progress that has been made.
- **Evaluating the pilot exercise:** We will rigorously and thoroughly evaluate the impact of the pilots. We are in the process of developing the evaluation model and local authorities will be centrally involved in the evaluation process.

Improvement Board Performance Book

LA:

Cheshire East

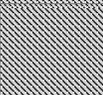
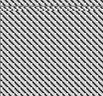
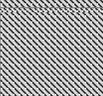
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See individual sheets for more detail about each performance measure

Theme	PI Ref	Measure	Polarity	Rag Rating	yr end Mar 13	2013/14(ytd)							How are we doing? (latest period)		
						July	Aug	Sep	Q1	Q2	Q 3	Q 4	Direction of travel	SN Av	England Av
Cross cutting/ setting the scene	1.1 a	Number of children in need at point in time (See individual sheet for definition)	in line with or better than average		1569	1142	1111	1071	1145	1071			↑	2711	
	1.1 b	Number of children in need at point in time per 10,000 population (<i>See individual sheet for definition</i>)			210	153	148	143	153	143			↑	259	326
	1.2 a	Number of children subject of cp plans at point in time			160	191	187	185	185	185			→	369	
	1.2 b	Number of children subject of cp plans at point in time per 10,000 population			21	26	25	25	25	25			→	36	38
	1.3	Number of initial CP conferences			117	12	8	9	38	29			↓	495	

	1.4	Number of privately fostered children			3	2	2	2	2	2			→		
	1.5	Number of children on CSE plan			7	11	11	10	13	10			→		
	1.6	Number of cared for children at point in time			376	369	361	363	363	363			→		
	1.7	Number of children started to be looked after			126	18	18	16	33	52			↑		
Quality of practice	2.1 a	% initial assessments completed within 10 days of referral	high		50%		24%		35%	24%			□	79%	77%
	2.1 b	Since April % IA's completed within 10 working days of referral	high		50%		29%		38%	29%			□	79%	77%
	2.2 a	% core assessments completed within 35 days	high		49%		36%		45%	36%			□	77.0 %	76.0%
	2.2 b	Since April % core assessments completed within 35 days	high		49%		52%		79%	52%			□	77.0 %	76.0%
	2.3	Since 1st July % children seen within 10 days of combined assessment start date (ytd)	high			95%	73%	76%		76%			→		
	2.4 a	Since 1st July % cases taking 35 days or less from combined assessment start date (ytd)	high			100 %	82%	71%		71%			→		
	2.4 b	Since 1st July % cases taking 45 days or less from combined assessment start date (ytd)				100 %	97%	89%		89%			→		

Partnership, Challenge and Scrutiny	3.1 b	Rate of referrals to CAT per 10,000	in line with or better than average		385.2	26	23	19	80	67				442	534
	3.2	% of referrals which are repeat referrals	low		10%	10%	12%	18%	10%	18%				25	26
	3.3	% agency consultation to ChECS by telephone	high			76%	63%	62%	63%	67%					
	3.4	Total consultations by ChECS				557	464	681	1273	1702					
	3.5	% referrals to CAT which do not result in an IA	low		2.7				8					12	16
	3.6	% IA's resulting in NFA	low						37					19	19
	3.7	% children subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time	low		51.1%	10.0%	0.0%	33.0%	13.0%	16.3%				14	14
Partnership, Challenge and Scrutiny	4.1	Rate of open CAFs per 10,000 population	high		64.8	67.2	67.8	68.9	71.3	68.9					
	4.2	Number of new CAFs	high		618	44	15	29	116	88					
	4.3	% of CAFs with lead professional other than LA	high		55%	66%	64%	63%	64%	63%					
	4.4	% referrals with previous CAF			10.7%	23.7%	14.3%	18.5%	15%	16.8%					

	4.5	% of elected members trained in safeguarding (accumulative)	high		0	29%	29%	29%	18%	29%			➔		
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Improvement Board Target Tracker

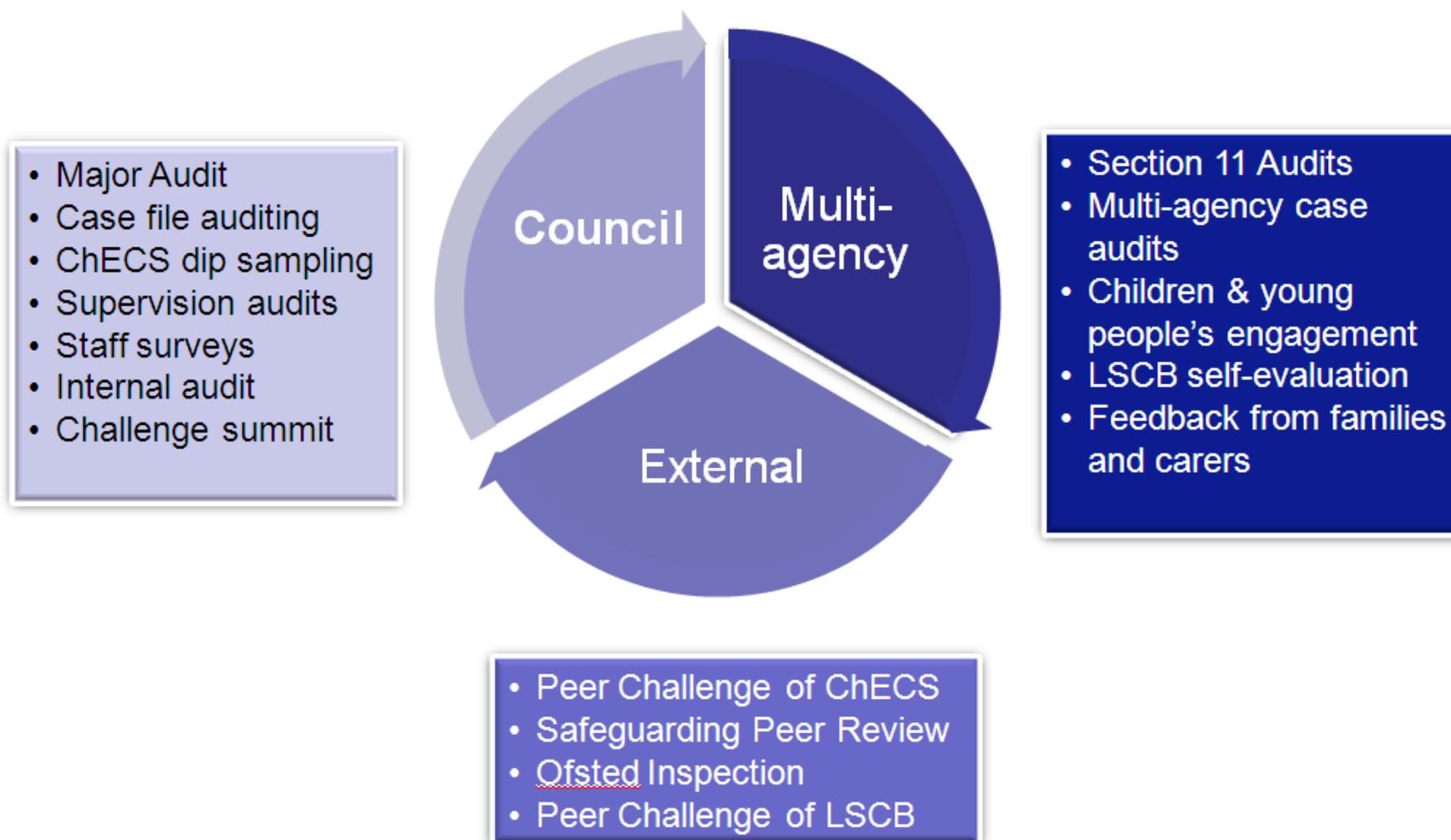
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Theme	PI Ref	Measure	Target	Aug-13	Sep-13	YTD
Quality of Practice	2.3	Since 1st July % children seen within 10 days of combined assessment start date	90	73	76	76
	2.4	Since 1st July % cases taking 35 days or less from combined assessment start date	75	82	71	71
	2.5	Number of CP plans open for more than 15 months	20	3	3	3
	2.9	% unfilled social worker posts (vacancies) (ChECS, CAT, CIN, CP)	2	0	0	0
	2.11	% of permanent, experienced SW's (ChECS, CAT, CIN, CP)	70	46	47	47
	2.12	Max single SW caseload (ChECS, CAT, CIN, CP)	30	33	35	35
Effective Front Door	3.2	% of referrals which are repeat referrals	10	12	18	14
	3.3	% agency consultation to ChECS by telephone	80	63	62	65
	3.7	% children subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time	15	0	33	15
Partnership, Challenge and Scrutiny	4.1	Rate of open CAFs per 10,000 population	75	67.8	68.9	68.9
	4.2	Number of new CAFS	700	15	29	204
			ANNUAL TARGET			
	4.5	% of elected members trained in safeguarding	90	29	29	29
ANNUAL TARGET						

Statistical Neighbours:

Cheshire West and Chester
 Central Bedfordshire
 Hampshire
 Hertfordshire
 North Yorkshire
 Solihull
 Warrington
 Warwickshire
 West Berkshire
 Worcestershire

Cheshire East's Children's Improvement Quality Assurance Framework



Children's Services Improvement News



October 2013

New Newsletter

Welcome to our new Newsletter. We'll be publishing 'Children's Services Improvement News' regularly to give you updates on the developments in our journey to improve Children's Services.

The story so far...

Following an unannounced inspection of Cheshire East's arrangements to protect children, Ofsted published its Inspection Report in April 2013, with a number of recommended actions. Cheshire East Council has since received an Improvement Notice setting out further improvements.

Cheshire East Council has developed an improvement plan to meet the recommendations from Ofsted and the Improvement Notice. The Improvement Board was set up in June 2013 to monitor and drive the progress made against the improvement plan. The Board meets monthly, has an independent Chair, and is attended by a representative from the Department for Education and senior officers and from Cheshire East Council, Health, Schools and the Police. The Lead Member, Chair of Scrutiny and Chief Executive are all members of the Board, ensuring the drive for improvement has political support. The Board is supported by an Executive Group that meets weekly to drive progress and ensure that the hard work by frontline services is reflected back to the Board.

The new 'front door' into Social Care is working well...

It's been over six months since Ofsted left the building and Cheshire East is showing strong signs of improvement in its arrangements to protect children thanks to the hard work of frontline staff and Managers. The Improvement Board recently signed off progress against a number of Ofsted's recommendations. This includes recommendations around the effectiveness of Cheshire East's Consultation Service (ChECS), the front door into Children's Social Care. This was set up in April 2013 with a new team, additional capacity, training and new ways of working.



- over 2,975 (about 570 per month) consultations have taken place since April
- Partners say: "We are pleased to be able to discuss cases with professionals", "the new process is much more transparent", "ChECS has made a big difference and is working well"
- 65% of contacts are through telephone – this ensures we can have a detailed discussion with the referrer and decide a solution to the problem together.

A recent external peer challenge of ChECS, carried out by Senior staff (Inspectors) from Lancashire County Council praised the work of the team. Inspectors looked at 28 cases selected randomly based on criteria in the new Ofsted framework, analysed key documents and interviewed frontline staff and managers. The feedback was very positive. The Inspectors reported that ChECS is well-staffed with good quality, experienced staff and managers. They found decisions were supported with a clear rationale, management oversight was clearly evident and of a good quality, and the quality of risk analysis and timeliness of response to referrals was good.

The Peer Challenge Team found no evidence within ChECS of premature closure of cases – which had been a concern Ofsted had highlighted in April.

"The team are clearly focused on improving performance and providing appropriate and timely responses to agencies and family members who contact them."

The report states that there is a proactive approach and makes good use of the step up and step down to appropriate services, especially in relation to the signposting or step down to CAF. Agencies spoken to felt that they had a better understanding of thresholds and that they benefitted from discussing cases. They found ChECS to be a



more inclusive approach to partnership working which was welcomed. Agencies felt that the Help and Protect Group was another example of good partnership working in enabling appropriate signposting of services to support families that did not meet the threshold for a social care assessment. It also enabled the group to hold agencies to account regarding commitment of services/resources.

The inspectors were impressed with the links with the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and early help to families.

"ChECS looks to signpost referrals to the right place so that children, young people and their families received the right service at the right time."

Other Highlights

- Almost 1000 case files have been audited since the Inspection; we know that these children are safe and that the right actions are in place for them;
- The new combined assessment was launched in July (ahead of most areas) and timescales have improved significantly;
- The maximum Social Worker caseloads have reduced from 46 in March to 35 in September; the average caseload is 22 and this remains static;

- Our recruitment and retention strategy is proving effective; all vacancies are filled (with temporary staff where recruitment is taking place);
- Scrutiny, performance and quality assurance arrangements have improved at every level; and
- A new LSCB Chair has been appointed, with extra capacity to drive change.

But there is still a long way to go...

We are still faced with a number of challenges in our plan to make services for children, young people and their families 'good' or better.

- Getting sufficient high quality staff in a competitive market
- Implementing the new case management system
- Ensuring consistently good practice
- Increasing the number of CAFs
- Sustaining the momentum and impact of our improvements
- An external review is underway to see if there are ways we can improve the Independent reviewing role



If you want to know more...

- See the Frequently Asked Questions
- Visit the Cheshire East website www.cheshireeast.gov.uk
- Speak to your representative on the Children's Improvement Board