

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of meeting: 8th June 2009

Report of: Ruth Jenkins, Services Manager Children and Families

Title: Safeguarding Children in Cheshire East

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report sets out the issues and actions being taken to ensure that there is a comprehensive response to the issues raised by Lord Lamings report into Child Protection in England, and services are developed that ensure best quality care and protection for vulnerable children in Cheshire East.
- 1.2 This report will highlight areas identified by the Annual Performance Assessment 2008 for Cheshire County Council, the establishment of Cheshire East LSCB, an external audit and review of front line services and other priorities in relation to safeguarding.

2.0 Financial Implications 2009/10 and beyond

- 2.1 Developments of children's services will take place within the context of the overall budget setting process, reconfiguring services to maximise efficient use of resources. Gaps in resourcing of front line children's social care have been identified in the short term and further work within the context of overall developments will identify if this remains the case.

3.0 Legal Implications

- 3.1 The local authority has a statutory duty to safeguarding and promotes the welfare of children. Failure to do so could leave the council open to legal claims and censure.

4.0 Risk Assessment

- 4.1 Safeguarding and child protection is a high risk activity. Failure to provide an effective service can lead to children being harmed, the council and councillors being criticised and the loss of public confidence.

- 4.2 The measures outlined below seek to ensure that services are developed which safeguarding children and minimise the risk to children and families and to the council

5.0 Information

- 5.1 Nationally the level of scrutiny for safeguarding is significant and Lord Laming's recent report made a series of recommendations for improvement. The accountability of the Local Authority was specific and significant in these recommendations. A detailed action plan (Appendix 1) has been developed in respect of these recommendations along with areas to improve following the Annual Performance Assessment in 2008 for Cheshire, which highlighted the following areas of work:-

- Assessment Timescales
- Securing placement stability for Looked After Children
- Adoption
- Private fostering

- 5.2 The APA will be replaced by the CAA and there will be an annual inspection on Safeguarding, which will consider the contact, referral and assessment processes of Children's Social Care. It is also likely they will focus on the above 4 areas, along with scrutiny of all local safeguarding arrangements.

- 5.3 These annual inspections will focus initially on local authorities with inadequate and adequate grades for Safeguarding. There will be no notice given, with up to 12 Inspectors involved. A Framework for these inspections has recently been published and work is under way to ensure as much as possible that the service is ready to receive the inspectors at any time, from 1 June 2009. Government Office North West advised us that we are likely to be one of the first authorities.

5.4 Assessment Timescales

A key focus for improved performance over the last year has been assessment timescales. Assessment performance in terms of the rate of completion within timescale continues to be the subject of monthly monitoring through performance clinics, chaired by the Principal Manager for Assessment and Care. The performance of social work teams in Cheshire East, in both initial and core assessments has exceeded the target of 75% with initial assessments at 77.6% and core assessments at 77.2%. There are however, 2 teams in Crewe, that continue to evidence difficulty in their completion rates and these teams are subject to ongoing focus and support.

The number of children subject to a child protection plan in Cheshire East has risen considerably to 146. This increase is being monitored

closely by senior managers, both with regard to the impact upon team and staff caseloads and to ensure compliance with statutory duties.

Additionally, the LSCB has commissioned an external audit of all children under 5 with a child protection plan. This audit will be completed by end the of May and will provide a useful tool, in assessing current quality of assessment and intervention, as well as identifying key actions required.

5.5 Securing Placement Stability for Looked After Children

The Looked After Children population has risen considerably over the last 2 years and is currently 368 children. The numbers continue to escalate in spite of stringent gatekeeping and reviews of all admissions. This obviously places great pressure on placement choice and stability.

The percentage of Looked After Children who are fostered by relatives and friends is significantly higher than average and this contributes to stability of placements, which in turn supports positive outcomes for children.

5.6 Residential Provision

Cheshire East currently still provides residential care in community based children's homes. Concerns about the quality of care have emerged recently following 2 OFSTED Inspections of 2 of these homes. As well as individual action plans, there is also a plan to review and modernise residential provision, along with a plan to implement "safer recruitment policy" for all residential care staff. The planned closure of one of these children's homes was brought forward the establishment closed.

5.7 Adoption

The adoption rates remain low, however, the number of children subject to placement orders has increased considerably and the number of children placed for adoption but not yet adopted has also increased by 20%. This should result in higher rates of adoption in the next financial year.

5.8 Private Fostering

There are currently 6 private fostering arrangements in Cheshire East. Private fostering procedures are being reviewed and updated and a private fostering champion has been identified.

5.9 Review of Services in Context of the Laming Report

A key aspect of Lord Laming Report is on ensuring that children in need have early access to effective specialists service and support and

that more needs to be done regarding safeguarding and child protection across all front line services.

An experienced social work practitioner has been commissioned by both East and West Councils to undertake a review of front line services to ensure there is sufficient capacity and that referral and assessments are timely and appropriate. The report is near completion.

Some key features to highlight in the social work teams are as follows:-

- 5.10 Staffing – there is a very stable and overall committed staff group. There is a relatively low turnover in staff and there have been exceptionally few permanent vacancies and this is highly unusual in children's social care services and needs to be carefully nurtured and sustained.
- 5.11 Management – some teams are extremely large and there is a clear need to introduce the role of deputy/practice manager, to assist managers in their role and ensure tighter oversight of child protection cases and Looked After Children.
- 5.12 Caseloads – the number of cases managed by social workers is large and is currently being reviewed. Some caseloads have on average some 20 to 30/40 cases. Often, caseloads in other local authorities would be a mix of 12-15 case. A case being one individual child.
- 5.13 Generic teams – most front line teams have generic caseloads (e.g., a mix of duty, child protection, looked after children and children in need). Although this can provide variety for staff, it can be difficult for managers to oversee if there are competing priorities. This is currently being addressed by the proposed new structure for Integrated Services in Cheshire East.
- 5.14 Integrated Children's System (ICS) – this is a key area also identified in the Laming Report and is being reviewed nationally. There have been a range of difficulties in the implementation of ICS through PARIS and frustrations for staff. These continue to be addressed through the appropriate forums and channels.
- 5.15 Early Intervention

Another key area identified by Laming to develop and strengthen service is to ensure children and young people get support as soon as possible to prevent problems escalating and creating a risk of serious harm. The tool to assist this is Common Assessment Framework (CVF), which is in its early stages in Cheshire East.

All of the above are part of an overall improvement plan.

6.0 Overview of Year One and Term One Issues

- 6.1 The actions that are to be taken this year are attached as an action plan at appendix A

For further information:

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Background Documents:

The Protection of Children in England: A progress Report. Lord Laming March 2009

The Protection of Children in England: Action Plan. The Government's response to Lord Laming May 2009

Framework for Unannounced Inspections.

Documents are available for inspection at: