

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

REPORT TO: SMT

Date of Meeting: April 20th 2011

Report of: Kate Rose, Principal Manager Safeguarding, Children's Services

Subject/Title: Social Care Audit

1.0 Report Summary

One of the key mechanisms through which organisations can learn how effective their practice is, is by carrying out systematic audit against agreed standards. Auditing should be a dynamic process with the aim of being a driving force in improving services and promoting good practice. This process should be informed by intelligence from performance measures, inspection findings, changes to statutory function, findings from complaints, Serious Case Reviews, and be part of a wider performance management framework. The evidence from the audits should also be triangulated by seeking the experience of children, young people and their families, as well as partners. However, as Munro stated, 'social work presents particular challenges because of the nature of its knowledge base. Improvements in services to users cannot be achieved just by managerial changes but requires rigorous research to increase understanding of what works. The process of making social work 'auditable' is in danger of being destructive, creating simplistic description of practice and focusing on achieving service outputs with little attention to user outcomes'. With this limitation in mind, the proposal in this paper sets out how the thematic audit process may be carried out in Cheshire East and some of the current challenges in implementing this.

In order to be effective, the process needs to be 'owned' and supported by all senior managers and relevant staff, and sit alongside the systematic audits carried out by first line managers as a check that minimum expectations are met by their individual workers.

2.0 Recommendations

- SMT agree the policy and tools (appendix A)
- Agree the steering group process and report format
- Discussion and agreement in respect of the challenges outlined below in background and options.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

As a relatively new authority Cheshire East did not appear to inherit a comprehensive audit programme that was well established and embedded from the previous County Council. Prior to my appointment a start was made and so far 2 audits have been carried out, the report of the most recent is attached (appendix B), as well as an audit of supervision files. Another audit is planned for April. The early findings of the audits carried out revealed as much about the process as the cases themselves. As a result a steering group has been established (membership and terms of reference within Appendix A), a draft policy written, new tools piloted and revised training incorporating the changes planned. In order to make progress SMT need to not only endorse the proposals, but actively lead the process and ensure that all relevant managers to the 'audit pool' are clear that SMT expect that they meet the requirements in a timely way.

4.0 Wards Affected

- 4.1 Safeguarding Children is an issue for every ward in the Council and the audit process is a part of this responsibility

5.0 Local Ward Members

- 5.1 N/A

6.0 Policy Implications including - Climate change - Health

- 6.1 N/A

7.0 Financial Implications for Transition Costs (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)

- 7.1 N/A

8.0 Financial Implications 2009/10 and beyond (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)

- 8.1 N/A

9.0 Legal Implications (Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)

- 9.1 N/A

10.0 Risk Management

- 10.1 There is a clear expectation that Children's Services staff at all levels are attuned to how well the services they are responsible for delivering meet the expected standards. This is tested out in Inspection and poor performance is a risk to the individual children, their families, the service and the potentially the

wider Council. The issues identified in the section below present a potential risk to the process and therefore in any external inspection.

11.0 Background and Options

- 11.1 The development of a more comprehensive quality assurance framework has been a priority for Children's Services Social Care. Part of this is the further development of a thematic audit process to complement the 'check list' auditing that occurs on the teams by line managers. It is important to accept that audit is an extremely complex and time consuming activity. A balance has had to be struck between establishing a process that will provide quality information for analysis that minimises individual variation in perception and is also manageable within the workforce availability and capacity. As a result the proposal in the policy will require phased introduction, and a number of issues need to be resolved or agreed on by SMT. These issues can be identified as:
- 11.2 There is currently no overarching performance framework that the audit process fits into, in order to adjust the focus from what *has* happened, but drives towards what *is* happening and what *will* happen. The proposal here is just one part of this and should inform and be informed by the experience of front line workers, partners, children, young people and their families, learning from SCR's and complaints, workforce development, horizon scanning etc
- 11.3 Currently, in electronic records, there is no consistency about what documents are placed where, which makes systematic auditing impossible to achieve – the steering group (and inspectors) will look in only one place and provide a nil return if the relevant document is not there but there needs to be agreement across the teams what and where this is. This needs to be tied into an updated recording policy.
- 11.4 The process of arranging the audit, the geography of the Authority and the scattered nature of paper files makes it complex to audit anything other than the electronic files. There needs to be a decision and resource, about the transfer of paper files into electronic information. Alongside this there also appears to be inconsistency in understanding what remains as paper information and what is required to be electronic, and some teams lack the resource to scan documents to meet this requirement.
- 11.5 There is currently no obvious place within PARIS for third party information in the way that paper files can distinguish. This results in these documents remaining as hard copies, and potentially as evidence divorced from the file that may have informed the decisions about a child.
- 11.6 There is currently no section within PARIS where it can be separately identified that the case has been audited, and for the reports to be posted when appropriate. Ideally there needs to be a section within the document element of PARIS with a note in the chronology identifying an audit has been undertaken (this would be any audit)
- 11.7 In order to conduct the audits effectively it was agreed that they needed to take place at a central location, (a number of possible permutations were considered). This is most appropriately done at Dalton House with

the expectation that auditors use 'hot desk' facilities. This has an implication for there being sufficient space made available at Dalton House and it would need to be agreed by SMT that if audit is a priority then the required facilities would need to be made available for the auditors.

- 11.8 Ideally, as outlined within the policy, the information needs to be triangulated by children, young people and their families and partners. There is not capacity at present to undertake this work and therefore the policy will be introduced in a phased way. If capacity is available from corporate colleagues to carry out this element of the audit process this would be very welcome and would carry the additional benefit of greater independence.
- 11.9 The importance of the audit process, the expectation that all members of the audit pool are required to participate, including attending the training, as outlined in the policy needs to be directed from senior managers.
- 11.10 Senior managers need to be visible as part of the audit process refer to paragraph 10:3 of the policy.)
- 11.11 It would be helpful to have the support of a member of the corporate auditing team to the steering group to offer expertise and challenge to the process.

12.0 Overview of Year One and Term One Issues

12.1 N/A

13.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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Embedded documents:

Appendix A - Audit Report & Tools



audit policy final
version.doc

Appendix B - Audit Cycle Report from Glynis Williams



smt summary sheet
2.doc