

Best Value Improvement Board

TITLE	Author	ITEM NO	Date
Children's Services Improvement-progress report	Anthony Walters- Programme Manager, Children's Services Improvement		11/9/2017

1 Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update on progress in delivering improvements to Children's Services in response to the report published by Ofsted in April 2017 which rated our services 'inadequate'. The Council's improvement plan aims to achieve a standard of 'good' by April 2019, which is the minimum our children and families deserve.
- 1.2 The body of this report includes commentary on progress in the four themes of our improvement plan, which was submitted to the Department for Education and Ofsted in July 2017. Whilst some progress has been made in all four themes, this first quarterly report identifies that there remain significant challenges in moving the service towards a 'good' standard.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 The Best Value Improvement Board is recommended to:

1. Note the progress made in delivering the children's services improvement programme.
2. Note the next steps in the improvement journey which will be updated on in the next report.

3. DETAILS OF REPORT

- 3.1 In April 2017, Ofsted published its report rating our services inadequate overall (but with some areas requiring improvement.) These findings were based on its inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and the local safeguarding children board, which took place in January/February 2017 under the Single Inspection Framework.
- 3.2 On 27th June, Cabinet agreed the council's response to this report and the submission of our improvement plan. The report agreed by Cabinet set out our analysis of the contributing factors to the inadequate judgement.
- 3.3 A full improvement plan has now been submitted to the Department for Education and Ofsted. The plan responds directly to the 15 recommendations identified in the Ofsted inspection report. It is an operational tool used by managers and frontline staff to drive our improvement activity which, crucially, focuses on the impact changes will have for vulnerable children. It is monitored and updated on a monthly basis by the Children's Services Improvement operational board, chaired by the Director of Children's Services, and every six weeks by our independently chaired improvement board. Quarterly updates will be reported to Cabinet and Best Value Improvement Board. This is the first quarterly update.
- 3.4 The council aims to achieve a 'good' rating for its children's services within two years, by April 2019. This is an ambitious undertaking given the extent of failings identified in the Ofsted report and the level of change required. The overall timeline for meeting this aim is:
- **Stage 1- Laying the foundations**

By September 2017, we will have completed the first phase of improvement activity which includes data cleansing, establishing governance and performance management arrangements, putting in place 'back to basics' training for social work staff, completing our initial recruitment campaign and workforce strategy and restructuring the children's social care service to improve management and accountability.
 - **Stage 2- Embedding sustained improvement**

By March 2018, we will be implementing our workforce strategy, have made changes to our delivery of early help services and be using performance data and qualitative case audits to show progress and identify areas for further improvement.
 - **Stage 3- Continuous improvement to a 'good' children's service**

Between April 2018 and March 2019 we will see a stabilised workforce with permanent posts filled and turnover reduced, and continuous improvement in performance data and qualitative audits towards a good service.
- 3.5 Our current improvement plan deals primarily with the first stage of this journey, so that we can maintain the flexibility to learn from the early stages of improvement activity, and the feedback we will get from our improvement partners and Ofsted monitoring visits. Future stages will be planned in more detail as we progress through the journey.
- 3.6 The council will be supported in its implementation of improvements by improvement partners appointed by the Department for Education in late July. Our partners are senior colleagues from Lincolnshire and Islington councils- both

of which have achieved ‘good’ ratings in their Ofsted Single Inspection Framework judgements.

- 3.7 Our progress will be monitored by Ofsted through quarterly monitoring visits. The first of these visits took place on 30-31 August. At the time of writing this report, the findings from that visit were not known.
- 3.8 On 27th June 2017, the Mayor in Cabinet approved our summary improvement plan, setting out the 10 components of a successful children’s service and our vision of what a ‘good’ service will look like. To give them focus, the objectives and actions that are being implemented to achieve this vision are grouped under 4 themes that directly relate to the findings of the Ofsted inspection. This report sets out the contribution that our improvement plan and each of its themes is making towards this vision.
- 3.9 Additional capacity has been provided to the service to ensure that rapid progress can be made whilst maintaining day to day service provision. An experienced interim Divisional Director for Children’s Social Care has been appointed to implement operational improvements and provide leadership in our improvement journey. The budget for Children’s Services has been increased by £5.2m for 2017-18. Further one-off investment is also being made to support the implementation of the improvement plan. The budget for this is being finalised.
- 3.10 Improvement activity at operational level is under way with an initial emphasis on getting the basics right to ensure a consistently good and legally compliant level of social work practice. The initial focus has been on Early Help alongside the ‘front door’ of our Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Assessment & Intervention (A&I), Child Sexual Exploitation and missing children as well as children in need (CiN). Work is also now underway through the rest of the child’s journey through the social care system. The approach has involved ensuring that there is greater clarity in what ‘good’ looks like, compliance with minimum standards and rigorous use of child level data and audit to monitor practice. This has started to show results in some areas although reported performance has initially declined due to data cleansing activity and an increased volume of referrals at the front door. Whilst this progress indicates some encouraging signs, there remain significant challenges in achieving a consistently ‘good’ service.
- 3.11 At the end of the first quarter, we are half way through the first stage of our improvement journey, ‘laying the foundations.’ The focus of improvement activity has been on establishing the fundamentals of a clear understanding of what ‘good looks like’, robust performance management using accurate child level data, and quality assurance processes that feed directly into improved service delivery and better outcomes for children. This has enabled us to begin to tackle the practice issues raised by Ofsted. Progress in our four themes is detailed in the following paragraphs.

Theme 1- Leadership, Management and Governance

- 3.12 The focus in this part of the plan has been to implement a robust governance structure with a supporting performance management framework, a workforce strategy and address sufficiency issues in relation to emergency and unplanned placements. This will contribute to the following components of our vision:
 - A whole council vision for excellence
 - An outward facing organisation and culture
 - Corporate and political support and an ambition for excellence

- Strong member- officer relationships based on trust and constructive challenge
 - A clear ‘golden thread’ from the political leadership through to the frontline
 - Strong and dynamic leadership throughout the organisation
 - A permanent and stable workforce with capacity and resources
 - Strong coherent partnerships at strategic and operational level
- 3.13 A Children’s Services Improvement Board has been established to provide direction in our improvement journey, and ensure that progress is robustly scrutinised. The Board is independently chaired by a nationally recognised expert in children’s services, and its membership includes:
- Executive Mayor and lead Cabinet member for Children’s Services
 - Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the lead Scrutiny member for Children’s Services
 - Chair of Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Children Board
 - Senior representatives from key partner agencies- schools, the Clinical Commissioning Group and Police
 - The council’s Chief Executive, Director of Children’s Services and senior officers from relevant council services
- 3.14 The Board ensures that there is clear political, corporate and partnership leadership of the improvement journey. The Board has now met three times and has provided its leadership to the development of the improvement plan, improvements to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and the consistent application of thresholds for support. It has agreed a forward plan identifying the key issues that it will be focussed on in the coming months, which include:
- Practice in relation to children who go missing and child sexual exploitation
 - The management of child in need cases
 - Workforce development
 - Culture change
- 3.15 A clear governance and reporting framework has been put in place which ensures that in addition to the Improvement Board there is oversight at appropriate levels in the officer and political governance structures. This includes Cabinet, the Best Value Improvement Board and Overview and Scrutiny Committee. We have also made changes to our corporate strategic performance indicator set, which is reported to Cabinet every quarter, to better reflect the children’s services improvement priorities and ensure crucial metrics demonstrating legal compliance are visible and interrogated.
- 3.16 To strengthen political understanding and oversight, the Lead Member has undertaken a number of visits and key meetings with staff and partners. This includes spending time with the MASH and A&I teams at the front door, and with the Fostering and Adoption, Looked After Children and Family Support & Protection Teams, with visits planned to the Virtual School and local authority children’s home. The Lead Member has regular meetings with the independent Chairs of both the Improvement Board and Local Safeguarding Children Board Chair, the Principal Social Workers and trades unions, as well as political support from a lead member in another, improving, local authority.

- 3.17 Training on understanding performance data has been delivered to the lead Cabinet and Scrutiny members for Children's Services and the chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Further training is being delivered in September to all elected members on their responsibilities in relation to children's services and how they can exercise these responsibilities including the interpretation of management information. We are working with the Local Government Association and Centre for Public Scrutiny to ensure that our approach to elected member scrutiny is informed by best practice from elsewhere. Alongside the direct involvement of members in the improvement governance structure, this will ensure robust scrutiny of children's services by elected members to address the failings in this area that were highlighted in Ofsted's report.
- 3.18 Staff recruitment and retention remains a challenge, with vacancy rates of 55% and over in some parts of the service. This is due to the competitive nature of the market for qualified social workers, coupled with the pressure of increased workload and the drive for improvement post Ofsted. We have reviewed our social work pay offer to ensure that it is competitive and supports the recruitment and retention of high quality staff. A recruitment campaign has taken place to start to address the immediate vacancy issues within the Children's Social Care Service. The campaign was successful in attracting a large number of 'hits' on its microsite, but attracted fewer applications from experienced social workers than hoped. We have also attracted some of our agency social workers to move into permanent posts to introduce further stability in the workforce. However, there is far more work to do to recruit and stabilise our social care workforce.
- 3.19 We are further developing our recruitment strategy to include better targeting through specialist recruitment agencies, presence at a national recruitment fair and an 'introduce a friend' scheme to incentivise staff to encourage others to apply for jobs in Tower Hamlets. We are also reviewing our rates of pay for agency workers, recognising that they will continue to play an important role in the resourcing of our service as we move towards a more stable workforce. Our approach will enable us to attract sufficient experienced social workers in the first instance, as well as developing and retaining our less experienced workers in the medium to long term through 'grow your own' schemes using Open University courses and the establishment of a social work academy. Action is also being taken to stabilise the leadership team within children's services. The senior leadership structure has been reviewed and we are recruiting permanently to strengthen capacity and skills at that level.
- 3.20 A 'back to basics' training programme has been commissioned and will be delivered for all social care staff between September and November 2017. This will be followed with a course of training in systemic social work practice. These courses of training are supplemented by ongoing training in specialist areas such as recognising and responding to child sexual exploitation and Domestic Abuse. This programme will ensure that the knowledge and skills of our staff are increased to address issues raised by the Ofsted inspection, whilst also supporting our staff retention strategy.
- 3.21 Sufficiency of emergency and unplanned placements remains an area of concern, and placement stability indicators are not showing improvement. An interim report on sufficiency is due to be completed in September, to address the availability of suitable residential and foster care placements for our current cohort of looked after children, and services for families with children who are likely to enter the care system where appropriate support may be able to prevent this. This will include the anticipated impact on future demand for care placements.

Theme 2 - A robust model of social work practice.

- 3.22 This theme is the main 'core' of our improvement plan and focusses on improvements in practice within the Children's Social Care service. The service manages all contacts received by the council where there are concerns about a child's welfare through to statutory assessments and interventions for children. This includes the placement and support of looked after children as part of the council's corporate parenting responsibilities.
- 3.23 The theme contributes to the following components of our vision:
- A strong model of practice, with good checks and balances
 - Clear and embedded systems, processes and data
- 3.24 There is a rigorous focus within the Children's Social Care Service on 'getting the basics right.' This has concentrated initially on the 'front door' of MASH and A&I, with an emphasis on consistent application of thresholds and timeliness of decision making. Evidence from auditing a sample of cases ('dip sampling') shows that significant improvements have been made in these two areas of practice. There has also been some work on practice relating to child sexual exploitation and children who go missing. We are now working through the rest of the child's journey. Our approach has included greater clarity in practice standards ('what good looks like'), management action on compliance with standards and recording, and the systematic use of data and case audits to lift quality and consistency.
- 3.25 The Ofsted inspection identified poor recording practice, leading to inaccurate performance information, as a contributing factor to its 'inadequate' judgement. Action has been taken to remedy this, with a significant amount of data cleansing of current and historic records. This means that performance data is now more accurate. At the same time, as expected after the poor Ofsted judgement, we are seeing an increase in workload with 15% more children on the caseload, an increase in monthly contacts of 41% and in referrals of 66% since April 2017. The combined effect of these two factors has led to deterioration in reported performance in our strategic performance indicator set for children's services. The actions we are taking to improve front line practice and ensure that there is a well-resourced and highly skilled service will deliver sustained performance improvement as we progress into the second and third stages of the improvement journey. Whilst progress has been made in some areas, there remain significant challenges to improve to a consistently 'good' service. For example, a recent audit of practice in relation to the 'toxic trio' of domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and mental health, has thrown up some significant practice challenges in this area which are now starting to be addressed.
- 3.26 Practice in relation to children identified as 'children in need' under the Children Act 1989 remains an area of focus, where there have been historic issues with recording and consistency of practice. All of these cases have now been reviewed and appropriate action taken to ensure children are safe. The Lead Member and the Improvement Board have asked for assurances on child in need cases and will continue to oversee this key risk area.
- 3.27 Progress is being made towards improvements in our early help offer for children and families who do not meet threshold for statutory social care services, with a strategic project to define the future model for early help on track to reach its conclusion in September 2017. This model will then proceed to implementation in the third quarter of 2017-18. Partnership buy-in to the early help offer will be critical to its success.

Theme 3- A sufficient and skilled workforce

- 3.28 This theme focusses on improvements in management oversight and supervision across all services, and in our management of private fostering cases which were highlighted as an area of concern by Ofsted. It contributes the following elements of our vision:
- Strong and dynamic leadership throughout the organisation
 - A strong model of practice, with good checks and balances
 - A permanent and stable workforce with capacity and resources
- 3.29 Progress has been made in improving management oversight, with improvement in the proportion of cases that have received timely management oversight, although further improvement is required to meet a consistently 'good' standard. At the end of June, 78.9% of cases had received management oversight within the last 8 weeks, an improvement from 60% in April 2017 although not yet meeting our 95% target. Work is ongoing within the Children's Social Care service to improve this figure. We are also carrying out dip sampling to test the quality of this oversight.
- 3.30 We have introduced new systems to robustly manage private fostering cases. All of the private fostering cases have had a case file audit, and every child has had an updated assessment to ensure we have an understanding of their holistic needs. Cases have been reviewed to ensure compliance with statute and national minimum standards for those children in private fostering arrangements. The new monitoring systems will be used to measure progress in this area in future reports.

Theme 4 - Quality Assurance and audit

- 3.31 This theme supports the following components in our vision:
- Clear and embedded systems, processes and data
 - A strong model of practice, with good checks and balances
- 3.32 Our quality assurance and audit programme was fully launched in August 2017. This activity is crucial to know whether our services are legally compliant, good quality, consistent, and making a difference for children. We have focussed on ensuring that there is a more consistent and robust understanding in the audit process of what 'good' looks like, and moderation is showing improvement in the consistency and reliability of audit findings, ensuring that we have reliable qualitative information to inform continuous improvement in practice.
- 3.33 The results of audits undertaken so far have fed directly into improvement activity in the front line. For example there has been rapid improvement in the quality of decision making in the MASH, and the robustness of challenge and scrutiny by Independent Reviewing Officers in child protection and looked after children cases.
- 3.34 Another focus in this theme is to ensure that care leavers have high quality, up to date pathway plans. Management oversight has been improved and whilst the proportion of care leavers with a plan as at the end of June is 92.7%, improvement is required in the number that have been reviewed in the last 6 months. Dip sampling to test the quality of plans commenced in August 2017. This is an area that still requires further improvement.

Next Steps

- 3.35 Cabinet will receive a further update on progress in three months' time. The key priorities for the next monitoring period, at the end of our first stage of improvement activity, will be:

- Working with our improvement partners to further develop the improvement plan
- Responding to the feedback from our first Ofsted monitoring visit, reviewing the improvement plan where necessary
- Completing our workforce strategy
- Completing the first report on our looked after children sufficiency strategy
- Focusing on key areas identified by the Improvement Board for scrutiny, including child in need practice, CSE and missing children

4. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

- 4.1 Implementation of the improvement plan is likely to have significant financial implications to LBTH.
- 4.2 Significant additional resources have already been identified as part of the 2017-2020 MTFS; in particular total additional growth of £5.2m addressing pressure in a range of areas, most of which feature in the improvement plan.
- 4.3 Direct costs relating to the improvement plan is currently being estimated as the ‘Sufficiency’ strategy is still being developed. It is proposed that the improvement activities will be funded by drawing down on the Transformation Reserve or the Risk Reserve.
- 4.4 The subsequent progress of the improvement plan costs will be reported to Members as part of the Council’s normal budget management reporting mechanisms.
- 4.5 The level of the proposed reserve will be based on a detailed assessment of the costs associated with the improvement plan and the demonstrable improvements that will be achieved as a result of the investment.

5. LEGAL COMMENTS

- 5.1 The framework for Ofsted inspections of Children’s Services is set out in sections 135-142 of the Education and Inspection Act 2006 (‘the Act’) and associated Employment and Education Act 2006 (Inspection of Local Authorities) Regulations 2007 (‘the Regulations’).
- 5.2 Ofsted’s “Framework and evaluation schedule for the inspections of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and Reviews of Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards” (‘the SIF’) sets out a single assessment framework for assessing local authorities during inspections conducted under section 136 of the Act.

Local authorities are graded outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate in each of the areas inspected.

- 5.3 The SIF notes that a rating of inadequate indicates: "*There are widespread or serious failures that create or leave children being harmed or at risk of harm and/or the welfare of looked after children is not safeguarded and promoted.*" (para. 31)
- 5.4 In light of the Council's rating of inadequate in 2 out of the 3 areas assessed, Ofsted's "Monitoring and re-inspection of local authority children's services judged inadequate" guidance will apply. Ofsted will carry out a programme of monitoring activities, including quarterly monitoring visits, to report on the progress made by local authorities. The monitoring visits will evaluate the progress made against the recommendations since the inspection and check that there is no decline in other areas (para. 5). Inspectors will produce a brief report about their findings and, in particular, their evaluation of the Council's progress. Other than the report arising from the first monitoring visit, these will be published (paras. 41-42).
- 5.5 Ofsted will usually re-inspect a local authority judged inadequate at its last inspection within two years of it submitting its action plan, usually after at least four quarterly monitoring visits. Because the Council has been found to be inadequate overall, this will involve a full repeat SIF, although this will be shorter than the initial SIF as inspectors will take into account information gathered during monitoring visits (paras. 50-52).
- 5.6 Implementing and reviewing the improvement plan is consistent with the Council's duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness by virtue of section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999. This is known as its Best Value Duty.