

Best Value Improvement Board

TITLE	Author	ITEM NO	Date
Children's Services Improvement-progress report	Anthony Walters- Programme Manager, Children's Services Improvement		18/12/2017

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 at the end of its first stage, 'laying the foundations.' Whilst we have met most of the aims of this first stage, giving us a firm foundation for improvement, there remain significant challenges in ensuring that the service improves to meet a 'good' standard and sustains this improvement. The focus in our next stage will be to build on the progress made so that improvement is achieved and sustained.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 The Best Value Improvement Board is recommended to:

- Note the progress made in delivering the children's services improvement programme.
- 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 for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and the local safeguarding children board inadequate overall (but with some areas requiring improvement.) Subsequently Cabinet agreed an improvement plan on 27th June which has now been agreed by the Department for Education and Ofsted.
- 3.2 The improvement 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 are reported to Best Value Improvement Board. The first quarterly update, covering the period from April to June 2017, was considered by Best Value Improvement Board on 11th September and this second update report details progress made between July and the end of September 2017.
- 3.3 In July 2017 the Department of Education (DfE) appointed Lincolnshire and Islington councils as our practice partners (PPs). The role of the PPs is to support us in our improvement journey by acting as external expert advisors. They will provide regular reports on progress which will be shared with the DfE. The focus of their support will be in the following areas where they have specific expertise that the council can learn from:
- Early help
 - Workforce strategy
 - Leadership and governance
 - Commissioning
 - Finance
 - Looked after children
- 3.4 The council aims to achieve at least 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. Our improvement plan sets out a three stage journey to achieving this aim. The end of September marked the end of the first stage, 'Laying the Foundations.'
- 3.5 The table below shows overall progress in the aims that we set for this first stage. This work has put in place the foundations to ensure that

improvement is built upon and sustained over the length of the programme:

Our aim	Progress and outcome
<p>Complete data cleansing to ensure that we have accurate management information</p>	<p>Data has now been cleansed across all areas of the service, this means that we have an accurate picture of performance to enable effective oversight of our services. Regular monitoring of data at child level, and case auditing activity, means that we now have greater control of data quality going forward and can actively tackle drift and delay in cases – a key issue highlighted by Ofsted. The extent of the problems with data quality before our improvement programme started means that in many areas reported performance has initially declined. We expect to see improvements over the next phase of the improvement programme.</p> <p>The availability of accurate data and the improved oversight this brings, is fundamental in ensuring that children receive appropriate and timely support and will support improved outcomes across the service.</p>
<p>Establish governance and performance management arrangements</p>	<p>The governance structure is in place, as reported in detail in the last quarterly update. Improvement activity is overseen by an independently chaired improvement board that includes elected members, senior council officers and partners. Progress is reported regularly to the corporate leadership team and elected members, including quarterly updates to Cabinet, Best Value Improvement Board and Overview and Scrutiny.</p> <p>Performance management arrangements are being embedded operationally through a system of performance surgeries using child level data. This is also supported by a programme of quality assurance activity including case audits, dip sampling and visits to services by senior managers and elected members.</p> <p>These governance and performance management arrangements ensure that there is clear leadership, accountability and</p>

Our aim	Progress and outcome
	transparency in our improvement journey and that children receive appropriate and timely support.
Put in place 'back to basics' training for social work staff	<p>This training started in October and the programme will be completed by December. Feedback from staff so far has been largely positive. We are developing further training to be delivered from January in line with the development of our social work model (see below).</p> <p>Improving the skills of our workforce will ensure that children and families receive better quality support that is effective in meeting their needs.</p>
Complete our initial recruitment campaign and workforce strategy	<p>The initial recruitment campaign was reported in the last quarterly report. We have now launched a rolling recruitment campaign which has been refocused to better attract social work staff to work in the borough. We have particularly attracted candidates at service and team manager levels, and have successfully recruited to all vacant team manager posts subject to clearance. This is positive, but we need to do more work to bring in excellent social workers. Our workforce strategy has been completed in draft form but is subject to some further work before its completion. Effective implementation of the workforce strategy will ensure that we have a stable workforce that is equipped with the skills needed to provide an effective and timely service meeting the needs of children and their families.</p>
Restructuring our children's social care service to improve management and accountability	<p>The service has been restructured into smaller team units, which are modelled on consistent and manageable caseloads and with clear accountability to a single team manager. This will improve management oversight resulting in a better grip of casework. The new structure went live on 1st October. Although it is too early to say whether this has impacted on performance, feedback from staff has been positive.</p> <p>The restructure will improve the management of</p>

Our aim	Progress and outcome
	casework across the service by ensuring that social workers have manageable caseloads and that management oversight is improved.
Complete our early help review with clear implementation plan	The review has been completed and implementation of its recommendations is underway. This will ensure that there is a more effective and joined up response to the needs of families so that we can help them before they need social care intervention.

3.6 The next stages on our improvement journey are as follows:

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.

3.7 Our progress will be monitored by Ofsted through quarterly monitoring visits. The first of these visits took place on 30-31 August. They found that considerable progress has been made to improve the service, although at this early stage in the improvement programme there remain challenges in ensuring that this progress is consistent across the service and sustained. In their feedback letter, they said:

“...the evidence gathered during this visit has identified a substantial recent improvement in the quality of practice and management oversight in both the MASH and the AI service. Many of the changes are very recent and need to be embedded. Senior leaders now have a more accurate awareness and overview of key strengths and weaknesses across the service. Significant challenges remain to further develop the workforce, particularly to ensure the recruitment and retention of staff in order to increase capacity. Nevertheless, leaders and managers demonstrate considerable determination, commitment and tenacity to embed and sustain these changes while simultaneously addressing the areas of poor practice.”

- 3.8 Ofsted noted the considerable progress that had been made in the following areas:
- Stronger partnership working in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, where concerns about children are first raised e.g. by schools, the police, other agencies or families.
 - More effective processes and decision making, ensuring urgent cases are prioritised with others processed in a timely way
 - Improved quality of decision-making in the assessment team, with children seen more quickly and as often as needed, and more children-centred assessments and plans
 - Better management oversight of cases ensuring that social workers are given clear direction to prevent drift and delay and improve quality of practice
 - A more thorough understanding of the effectiveness of casework through improved systems for the use of management information and casefile audits.
- 3.9 Ofsted's second monitoring visit took place on 12th and 13th December. This focussed on our Family Support and Protection service. We have not yet received formal feedback from this visit.
- 3.10 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.
- 3.11 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. A new Divisional Director post has been created and permanently recruited to which covers children's commissioning, including social care placements and early help, which further adds to capacity at senior management level. Additional capacity has also been put in place at service manager level. The budget for Children's Services has been increased by £5.2m in 2017-18. Further one –off investment is also being made to support the implementation of the improvement plan. The budget for this will be finalised by January 2018.

3.12 The following paragraphs set out in more detail the progress that has been made in each of the four themes of our improvement plan.

Theme 1- Leadership, Management and Governance

3.13 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

3.14 As reported above, governance and performance management arrangements have been put in place as part of phase 1 of our improvement programme. In addition, political leadership and knowledge of children's social care has been further embedded, through two seminars for all Members; a planned seminar specifically on Child Sexual Exploitation; practice visits for the Mayor, Lead Member and Scrutiny Lead; spotlight sessions at Overview and Scrutiny Committee; regular discussion at Cabinet and pre-Cabinet meetings; verbal briefings by the Director for opposition Members; and fortnightly meetings between the Mayor, Lead Member, Chief Executive and Corporate Director, alternately attended by the independent Improvement Board Chair.

3.15 Staff recruitment and retention remains a challenge. In October, 35% of posts across the service were filled by agency staff, rising to 75% in the 'front door' teams within Assessment and Early Intervention. 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. Since our last quarterly report, we have refocussed our recruitment campaign, streamlined recruitment processes and have attended a high profile social work recruitment fair in November, where we attracted a high level of interest and conducted pre-screening interviews. We have also attracted more of our agency social workers to move into permanent posts to introduce further stability in the workforce.

The vacant posts in the senior management team in Children's Social Care that are currently occupied by interim staff have been recruited to subject to clearance. There has been a good response and we expect to fill all of these posts through the current round of recruitment. Enhanced support is being put in place for newly qualified staff to ensure that retention is improved as part of the medium to long term strategy to 'grow our own' staff.

- 3.16 Our 'back to basics' training programme is being delivered and will be completed by December 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.
- 3.17 Our workforce strategy is currently in draft form. It sets out the medium to long term approach to developing a sustainable and high skilled workforce and our vision to make Tower Hamlets one of the best places to be a social worker. While the strategy has not yet been completed, work is already underway on key elements to ensure that we move towards a stable workforce as quickly as possible.
- 3.18 Sufficiency of emergency and unplanned placements remains an area of concern. Too many children experience having to move between different placements, leading to instability and disruption. Our sufficiency strategy has now been completed, addressing the availability of suitable residential and foster care placements for our current cohort of looked after children. The strategy also introduces new 'edge of care' services for families with older children who are likely to enter the care system where appropriate support for the family may be able to prevent this, enabling them to stay at home. This will improve outcomes for these children as well as reducing demand for care placements helping us to better manage the budget for children's social care.
- 3.19 The remaining challenges relating to workforce and sufficiency of looked after children are the main focus of this theme in phase 2 of the improvement programme, as we move into completion and implementation of the two strategies outlined above.

Theme 2- A robust model of social work practice.

- 3.20 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.

- 3.21 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
- 3.22 The council's approach to practice improvement includes 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.
- 3.23 Our quarter 1 monitoring report set out the initial focus on the 'front door' of MASH and A&I. The early success of this approach was validated by Ofsted in their first monitoring visit as set out earlier in this report. Our performance monitoring and quality assurance activity shows that this improvement is being sustained and built upon, with more timely and consistent decisions meaning that children who are referred to the service get the help that they need. For example, more assessments are being completed within 45 working days, and more child protection conferences are taking place in a timely way. The proportion of children being seen by a social worker within appropriate timescales has also significantly improved. As well as being more timely, our case auditing is showing that the quality of work is improving. This means that we can be more certain that children are receiving appropriate and timely interventions to keep them safe.
- 3.24 Activity in the second quarter has focussed on achieving similar improvement in the Family Support and Protection (FSP) teams, who deal with longer term casework of children who are assessed as being in need or subject to a child protection plan. All cases held by the FSP teams have now been reviewed, to ensure that the information held about them is accurate and that they are effectively managed to ensure appropriate and timely support is in place for families and that children are kept safe. Management oversight across the service has been improved and in October, 86%, of cases had management oversight recorded in the last 8 weeks. Our target is for 90-95% of cases to receive this level of oversight and we expect to move closer to this target over the next quarter as our new organisational structure beds in. The improvements in case management across the service have resulted in an increase in the proportion of children in need that have plan in place from 51% in June 2017 to 65% at the end of October, a figure we expect to increase further

as this work progresses. Approximately 86% of these children had a review of their plan within the last six months. At the same time, the proportion of children subject to a child protection plan who had been visited by a social worker within the past four weeks increased to 90%.

- 3.25 In our last quarterly report we reported concerns about practice in relation to identifying where the 'toxic trio' of domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and mental health requires support from children's social care. Since then, daily meetings have been introduced in our Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) to ensure that risk is appropriately identified. This is reflected in the increase in the proportion of contacts that are progressing to referral from 32% in April 2017 to 37% in September.
- 3.26 The review of our early help services has now been concluded. As a result we are now implementing changes to the way we support families before they need help from social care services, to prevent problems from escalating and manage demand in the social care system. These changes will see the implementation of a 'single front door' and multi-disciplinary, locality-based teams to ensure that the right families receive the right support in a timely way, and that resources are properly targeted to areas of need. Phase 1 of these changes will be implemented by April 2018.
- 3.27 In light of ongoing concerns about our local thresholds for social care intervention, in particular the extent to which these are well understood by partner agencies, a decision has been taken through the Local Safeguarding Children Board to adopt the Pan London child protection thresholds. This will bring us in line with most other London boroughs and help to ensure consistency. Work is underway with partners to implement the new thresholds and this will be completed by mid-December 2017.
- 3.28 Alongside this work, we are consulting with staff on a new model of social work practice following a decision to move away from the 'signs of safety' model, which Ofsted found had been poorly implemented. Initial feedback from staff about this change has been largely positive with a core group of social workers involved in developing the new model. This work will be completed by early 2018.
- 3.29 Whilst good progress has been made across this theme, there remain significant challenges in ensuring that social work practice is consistently robust. Whilst the improvements noted above are significant, performance is not yet at the level that would be expected from a 'good' service. Over the next quarter, following the action taken to address the fundamentals of performance management and quality assurance, and the restructure of the service, we expect to see sustained improvement in

all areas of work to demonstrate progress. The work that is ongoing as part of theme 1 to address our workforce challenges will be key to this as they begin to deliver a more stable and skilled workforce.

Theme 3- A sufficient and skilled workforce

3.30 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

3.31 Management oversight in the last quarter has consistently achieved a level of performance which at 86% of cases reviewed within the last 8 weeks is an improvement from 60% in April 2017. We have not yet met our 95% target, but following the restructure of the service which was effective from 1 October and introduced more manageable case numbers for team managers, we expect this figure to improve. Training for managers is being delivered as part of our 'back to basics' programme which will further support improvement in this area.

3.32 Following the implementation of child level reporting, private fostering cases are reviewed at 3 weekly performance surgeries. Work to ensure that privately fostered children have an updated assessment has been completed and all of these children now have a child in need plan. All privately fostered children have had an audit and up to date assessment. Under the regulations, privately fostered children should have a visit every 12 weeks; as good practice the service has determined that all these children should also have a reviewed CiN plan to ensure we are meeting the needs of this cohort as identified in the assessment. New processes are in place to ensure that any child that fits the criteria for private fostering has a MASH assessment prior to be referred into the private fostering team. This is to ensure that information is shared at a multiagency level at the earliest opportunity.

3.33 Theme 4- Quality Assurance and audit

3.34 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

3.35 Our quality assurance and audit programme was fully launched in August

2017 and we are continuing to use audit activity systematically to inform our improvement activity under theme 2. A further 30 auditors will have been trained in November to increase capacity.

- 3.36 As part of embedding Quality Assurance at all levels, Ofsted recommended that we take forward “Practice Week”, where senior leaders spend time with frontline social workers reviewing cases and shadowing their work with children and families. An initial Practice Day was delivered in October, attended by the Lead Member for Children’s Services, Scrutiny Lead for Children’s Services, Corporate Director and Divisional Director. A Practice Week is scheduled for late November.
- 3.37 Ensuring that care leavers have up to date and reviewed pathway plans is another subject of this theme. Whilst the proportion of care leavers with a pathway plan has been maintained at 96%, the percentage that were reviewed in the last 6 months started to improve in October but still requires significant improvement. This is under review and will be informed by the dip-sampling activity that has taken place; the Leaving Care team has been given clear guidance around expectations.

Next Steps

- 3.38 Best Value Improvement Board will receive a further update on progress in three months’ time. The key priorities for the next monitoring period, will be:
- Completing and beginning implementation of the workforce strategy, starting to address the challenge of permanently staffing the children’s social care service.
 - Implementing the sufficiency strategy, in particular the immediate actions to support families with older children that are at the point of entering the care system (on the ‘edge of care.’)
 - Consolidating and building on the improvements we have made in performance and quality across the social care service, including embedding the new ways of working associated with the new team structure.
 - Beginning our implementation of the new model for early help services.
 - Implementing the new child protection thresholds.
 - Strengthening data systems to support robust performance management and reporting, and streamline processes for staff.
 - Implementing our new model of social work practice.

4. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

- 4.1 It is acknowledged that the implementation of the Children’s

Improvement Plan will only be achieved by Council leadership providing the financial resources required for its delivery.

- 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 Council leadership is also committed to providing one-off investment funded via Transformation Reserve to support the implementation of the improvement plan. The estimated cost of the improvement plan is being finalized and would be reported to Members in January 2018 as part of the Council's normal budget management reporting mechanism.
- 4.4 The level of the one-off funding sought will be based on 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'). 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.
- 5.2. 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. Ofsted's lead inspector will review the Inspection Improvement Plan to ensure that it reflects the recommendations contained in the inspection report. 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.
- 5.3. In respect of the recommendations contained in the report, the Council has a 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.

- 5.4. The recommendations that the Best Value Improvement Board should endorse the progress made in delivering the children's services improvement programme and agree the next steps in the improvement journey, are consistent with the Council's duty to secure continuous improvement in its functions. Failure to make the necessary improvements to children's services could result in the Secretary of State appointing a Children's Services Commissioner or removing service control from the Council.
- 5.5. In carrying out its functions, the Council must also comply with the public sector equality duty set out in section 149 Equality Act 2010, namely it must have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful conduct under the Equality Act 2010, the need to advance equality of opportunity and to foster good relations between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.