

Briefing for Ambitious Scrutiny

Children's Social Care - September 2014



1. Introduction

- 1.1 Children's Social Care (CSC) provides social work and social care support services for vulnerable children and young people in Plymouth. This includes all assessment work, children in need, children subject to Child Protection Plans and children in care.
- 1.2 The service is currently organised so that children and young people's needs are assessed in the first instance in the Advice and Assessment (A&A) teams. A police sergeant from the Public Protection team based is usually based with the screening team, and a member of the Common Assessment Framework team based within the service. This means that we have effective arrangements for information sharing and liaison with early help services.
- 1.3 Children in need including those that become subject to a Child Protection Plan will transfer to the Children in the Community (CintC) teams, and those that come into care will transfer to the Children in Care (CIC) teams. The CIC teams deal with the cases that are in care proceedings and the adoption and fostering teams. There is a specific Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service team that works with children in care and this team is based with the CIC teams which enables effective joint working.
- 1.4 In addition we work closely with colleagues in the integrated commissioning service, and they are involved in commissioning specific services such as those purchased on an individual basis for specific children such as residential placements. They work closely with commissioning colleagues in the locality from the peninsula – i.e. Devon, Cornwall and Torbay to ensure effective market management, and cost and volume arrangements.
- 1.5 This report will set out the current performance, areas of strength and priority actions that ensure on going improved outcomes and service delivery.
- 1.6 We have strong performance in relation to the timeliness and quality of our assessment work, which then leads onto timely work with children subject to care proceedings. We remain one of the top performing authorities in the country in relation to completing care proceedings within agreed timescales. This contributes significantly to achieving better outcomes for children as we also perform well in relation to the numbers and timeliness of children placed for adoption.
- 1.7 We are aware of key areas where we have actions and plans in place to ensure that we are driving forward improvements. Current priorities include:
- Building on work to ensure that the voice of the child is central to all aspects of our work and planning.
 - Improving the quality of child care planning including child protection plans.
 - Improving placement stability for children in care.

2. Referral rates and thresholds

- 2.1 Referral rates continued to rise last year with an annual increase of 18.9% in 2013 – 14. This has meant the service has continued to face on going capacity issues, and workload pressures. We have placed a high degree of emphasis on ensuring that needs are met effectively, and that

staff are well supported in undertaking their duties to ensure effective care planning for all children in need, children subject to plans, and children in care.

- 2.2 At the same time we have played a leading role as part of the Plymouth Safeguarding Board in developing and agreeing a new Assessment Framework. This includes agreed thresholds for referrals to CSC. The framework was agreed in December 2013, and a series of multi-agency workshops were run by CSC officers between January and March 2014. These were run on a multi-agency basis and over were attended by over 400 staff.

3. Core Assessments

- 3.1 Timeliness in relation to undertaking Core Assessments improved at the end of last year, and the current rate (end of quarter 1 2014/15) is 90.8% against a target of 87.5%. This is a major achievement in the context of the continuing increased demand. The management team has undertaken an internal audit that provides evidence of good quality assessments based on strong analysis and evaluation. The audit also outlined the need for continued improvement in evidencing the voice of the child and this will be the focus of continued improvement work in the service, as well as the focus for the quality assurance report for quarter 2.
- 3.2 The single assessment replaces the core assessment and new processes and arrangements are now agreed. The final stages in embedding this in the case management system are now being implemented. This means that we will be using the new framework by October this year.

4. Children subject to Child Protection Plans

- 4.1 The number of children subject to child protection plans rose throughout 2013-14 from 313 – 380. This rising trend has continued in the first quarter of 2014-15. The profile of the children and young people coming onto plans has not changed during this period, with the highest numbers of children subject to plans due to neglect and domestic abuse. We are aware that a number of partner agencies are experiencing a similar rise in acute referrals. Independent chairs continue to scrutinise thresholds for initial child protection case conferences. A&A managers actively audit the quality of core assessments, as these inform the decision to make a child subject to a CP plan.

5. The quality of Child Protection Plans

- 5.1 In October 2013 the Children's Social Care management team undertook an audit into 35 cases of children who had been subject to child protection plans on more than one occasion. Some good practice was identified, particularly around improved recognition of the impact of chronic neglect and of domestic abuse. However, there were also some issues identified with recording processes, including supervision recording, some staff not always recognising disguised compliance, and some child protection plan recommendations not being Specific Measurable Achievable Relevant and Time specific (SMART). An action plan is in place to embed emotionally intelligent supervision arrangements and secure enhanced management oversight. The plan also includes the delivery of training to front line staff to improve recognition of disguised compliance, and in writing SMART plans.
- 5.2 In addition we continue to place increasing emphasis on ensuring that the voice of the child is central to all the work we undertake. As part of the work we are doing to implement the 10 wishes presented to the PSCB last October we have an action plan. This includes planning an inspection by the Young Inspectors of our work with children and young people subject to child protection plans.

6. Quality Assurance and audit activity

6.1 A number of new auditing initiatives have been embedded during 2013-14, under a comprehensive auditing framework, which sets out a programme of regular casework audits undertaken by managers from the assistant director down. The themes from these are aggregated and used to inform improving practice and outcomes. In addition the management team undertake a range of themed audits in response to practice issues. In 2013-4 this included CP plans, quality of supervision, and cases moving from Child Protection to Children in Need. A system of multi-agency audits involving key partners has also been established, and proved successful in identifying learning. A programme of management observations is also in place, including the Strategic Director for People, the Assistant Director and service and team managers observing and giving feedback on practice.

7. Children in care

7.1 Children in Care population had remained relatively steady in the four years prior to 2013/14 unlike our neighbouring authorities all of whom apart from Cornwall saw a steady increase. In Plymouth there was a peak in 2010 when number rose to 435, but all other years numbers remained at approximately 380. The 2012/13 figures showed the rate per 10,000 to be 73, compared with Statistical neighbours at 78.8. In recent months there has been a slow but steady increase in number of Children in Care and as of the 31st July 2014 there were 411 Children in care. These figures indicate that we are seeing a similar rise in numbers of children coming into our care, but the numbers of children leaving care have previously meant that this has not necessarily translated into an on- going increase in previous years.

7.2 The numbers of children coming into care, compared with those leaving care to return home; be permanently placed for adoption or Special Guardianship Order; or reaching the age of 18 years; is subject to detailed analysis and evaluation on an on- going basis

8. Placement stability

8.1 In 2010/11 in Plymouth 17.2% of looked after children had three or more placements within the preceding 12 months. By October 2012 this had significantly improved and reduced to 14.5% however it was still above national averages and rose again to 15.9 % by the end of March 2013. This year, 2014/15 the government has revised the reporting format so that missing episodes do not count as a placement change. The reported figures for 31st July 2014 are 14.20%.

8.2 The detailed breakdown of the data shows that that the highest proportion of children experiencing more than 3 placements in the last year are aged between 16 and 18 years, with those children that are placed for adoption also being a significant proportion of those with 3 or more placements.

8.3 We are maintaining a relentless focus on improving placement stability for all children and we have two action plans as part of the Looked after Children Strategy to address this. There are particular issues in relation to provision for those entering care at 16 or over, often for the first time and also for those who may have been in the care system for several years. These young people can demonstrate significantly challenging and often risk taking behaviours.

8.4 One of the factors that impacts on placement stability is sufficiency at the point of matching and we are continually seeking to improve the supply of placements that will enable children and young people in care to reach their goals. Placement choice within the city is a key issue and there is a planned large scale campaign to recruitment of foster carers in-house in 2014 alongside the

developments with commissioning to increase the local in city provision. We know from research that maintaining family connections, friendships and education provision were at all possible is important on longer term outcomes and the provision of placements in the city also allows for a more immediate and coordinated response from local statutory services and partners.

9. Children placed out of area

- 9.1 Plymouth has at present 107 young people placed out of area but many of them are within easy access of the city boundary and the children remain placed in their original school provision until a permanently matched placement is identified and care proceedings have completed before consideration is given to any move of education.
- 9.2 A number of foster carers within our own Plymouth foster care and in independent fostering agencies are in the surrounding areas for example of Saltash/Torpoint and Ivybridge.
- 9.3 Plymouth City Council currently has 30 children in care placed in residential care homes. This represents an increase in numbers of Plymouth children placed in residential care and is due to the number of children with very complex needs and significant risk taking behaviour coming into care. We continue to consider new and creative ways of engaging and supporting our provider market to expand and improve quality. Currently we are exploring options of applying for grant funding to support new ways of working which will aim to reduce the number of children and young people requiring residential care, and to step down those already in residential placements.

10. Timeliness of proceedings

- 10.1 Plymouth has continued to perform well in relation to the expectations of the Family Justice Review and the introduction of the requirements of the Public Law Outline.
- 10.2 We are within the 26 week timescale and the only cases that are outside and being treated as exceptional are those where there is a Finding of Fact or an issue with regards to nationality and a potential placement with a relative abroad resulting in assessments having to take place.
- 10.3 In the month of July 2014 the average timescale for completion of care proceedings for children and young people in care was 23.1 weeks and this is higher than the national average.

11. Adoption

- 11.1 In the last two years the adoption service has been actively involved in the embedding of the Adoption Reform agenda and working across the Peninsula to ensure that there is an increase in adoptive placements. In 2013/14 there were 40 adoption orders granted for children in placement. There are 27 children placed with prospective adopters where the expectation is that an adoption order will be applied for in the coming year. In 2013/14 38 adopters were approved an increase from 35 the previous year.

12. Adoption – regional developments

- 12.1 In the past twelve months Torbay, Devon, Families for Children and Plymouth continue to work closely together and all of the adoption agencies publish a list of each other's information sessions and training dates to enable adopters to receive more timely information and provide increased training programs. Further work has continued throughout 2013 into 2014 in relation to adopter recruitment and joining resources for a joint TV campaign and adoption conference as well as improving matching within our agencies. This work is currently being progressed with this work coming to fruition late 2014 early 2015.

- 12.2 As part of the Adoption reform, Adoption Activity days have been introduced. An Adoption Activity Day took place in November 2013, 48 children in total attended with 19 children being from Plymouth and the remainder of the children split from Devon and Torbay. 31 adoptive families attended some travelling from London and Somerset. Two voluntary agencies Barnardos and Families for Children attended with their adopters. Four of Plymouth's children, two single and two sets of sibling groups of two were successful in finding adoptive families through the Adoption Activity Day.
- 12.3 Plymouth took the initiative in being the first to host this type of the event in the region. Working in partnership with our local adoption agencies it was agreed Devon would host the next activity Day in April 2014 and Torbay in October 2014 with a reciprocal arrangement for bringing our children to the event making it more cost effective for our agencies and to help achieve adoptive placements not for our own children waiting but children in the region.