

North Somerset Council

Report to the Children & Young People Policy & Scrutiny Panel

Date of Meeting: Thursday 10 March 2022

Subject of Report: Family Support & Safeguarding Update

Town or Parish: N/A

Officer/Member Presenting: Becky Hopkins, Assistant Director, Family Support & Safeguarding, Children's Services

Key Decision: No

Reason: To update Scrutiny Panel on Family Support & Safeguarding

Recommendations

Members receive an update and evaluation of the current position in the Family Support & Safeguarding Service so they have a full understanding of the strengths and ongoing areas for development.

1. Summary of Report

Set out below is an up-to-date overview of the strengths, challenges and identified areas for development within the Family Support & Safeguarding Service. It highlights what we are doing well and areas we are focusing on to continue to strengthen and improve the service we offer to children and their families.

2. Policy

This update is supported by North Somerset's Children and Young People's vision and plan.

3. Details

3.1 Summary

Children's Services data 2020/21

- 7% of our children's population were open to Children's Services at some point in 2020/2021.
- In 2021 there were 9684 contacts from either the public or professionals to Children's Services.
- Of these 9684 contacts 598 (6%) converted to referrals to Children's Social Care.
- At the end of December 2021:
 - 528 children had an Early Help offer

- 257 children were subject to a Child in Need plan
- 80 children were subject to a Child Protection plan
- 192 children were in care
- 11 children were adopted between April 2021 to December 2021
- 200 young people were care leavers.

Strengths

There has been strong member support for the children's services improvement journey with the leader and the lead member attending the partnership board, the establishment of the corporate parenting board, now chaired by the lead member, as a formal committee of the Council and through the scrutiny sub-subgroups.

A permanent senior leadership team has been established and recruited to; an assistant director and 7 heads of service, giving sufficient and stable capacity and a shared sense of collective purpose.

We have responded positively to the advice and challenge from our sector-led improvement partner, North Tyneside and have moved ahead with the redesign of our Front Door. It launched in February 2021 and is providing stronger information, advice and signposting to professionals and the public, as well as a single-entry point into our targeted early help (family well-being service) and children's social care. These streamlined front door processes enable more timely and responsive provision of support and ensure proportionate responses to children and families based on their needs.

Performance is very stable; demand at the front door for social work intervention continues to be low in part because of relatively low overall deprivation (despite some pockets of very high deprivation) but also because of a well-developed range of early help services. Re-referrals, open cases and Child Protection plans per 10K children are also low by national comparators and stable over the last two years. The number of children in care has been steadily decreasing over last two years, during which time both placement stability indicators have significantly improved.

Challenges

While there has been considerable progress made, a strong and consistent model of practice is not yet well embedded or consistently applied. We know that children's plans need to be achievable and outcome-focused and taken forward more authoritatively by social workers in a high support and high challenge environment. Assessments and plans need to reflect and be informed by the child's lived experience and their voice.

Alongside the development of a clearer model of practice we need to support team managers to ensure that their supervision and management oversight evidences reflection, clear direction of travel and responsive planning.

Although there have been a number of active plans to improve and embed quality assurance in recent years, the quality assurance system remains weak. The focus of quality assurance needs to move from compliance and process to a focus on children's needs and the impact and outcome of our intervention. Developing and adopting a new quality assurance system is one of our more urgent tasks and will support the strengthening of the quality of practice and learning and development.

3.2 Overview of current position and demands

- Our performance information evidences proportionate intervention – the right intervention at the right time to support children to remain in the care of their families and communities wherever possible. Going forward it will be important to maintain our focus on strength and relational-based practice and proportionate intervention whilst ensuring that we clearly evidence our understanding of the child's lived experience, their needs and identified risk in our assessments and clearer analysis of the impact of parental problems on their ability to meet their children's needs. There is further work to do to ensure that assessments and plans are sufficiently focussed on the needs and experiences of children and that focus on parent's/carer's needs is about what needs to change to enable them to meet the needs of their children.
- Repeat Child Protection Plans – 24% of children who were made subject to a Child Protection Plan in the last 6 months had been made subject to a plan previously. Recent initial audit indicates that, in the majority of cases, the reasons for the repeat plan are the same as the reasons for previous plans. Social work intervention where there is previous involvement with a family needs to focus on the history (use of chronologies), the experience of the child, the likelihood of positive and lasting change and the impact on the child if this is not achieved. The main reason for children being made subject to a Child Protection Plan is neglect.
- Placement sufficiency, as per the national picture, is a challenge. We are experiencing a significant pressure on placement capacity at both a local and national level. This current paucity of available placements can limit our ability to appropriately match children to carers and can result in children being placed away from the local area and their family and social networks, schools and community support however, our performance in relation to children placed in foster placements (74%) and children placed in our own provision (55%) is higher than the national average and our statistical neighbours. We are planning a significant recruitment drive in 2022 to increase our numbers of in-house mainstream and specialist foster carers.
- Within North Somerset we do not have any local authority owned residential capacity and there is limited residential capacity to meet the needs of North Somerset young people. At present North Somerset places a high proportion of children (9 out of 11) in commissioned residential placements outside the authority. A small number of children and young people in North Somerset present with very complex needs in crisis, often primarily related to emotional and mental health. We do not have provision locally or sufficiency of provision in the region if any of these children need to come into our care. We are working with colleagues on the regional sufficiency work, and we plan to develop a local specialist foster care service to meet this need,

including being able to provide a crisis response, with the support of partner agencies.

- We have seen an expected increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) that we will need to provide care for, either through the agreed National Transfer Scheme or spontaneous arrivals through such routes as Bristol Airport. We have seen a steady increase over the last 6 years in the number of UASC. We currently have 17 young refugees. This is 9% out of the total Children in Care cohort which is higher than the latest England figure of 6.2% and our statistical neighbours – 6.1%. These young people require care placements and allocated social worker support (under 18 years) and personal assistant and leaving care services (post 18 years).
- The development of 16+ Supported and Independent Living schemes within the area has been successful in meeting demand and providing best value.
- The percentage of 19-21-year-old care leavers who were in education, employment and/or training (EET) at the end of December was 58%. This is higher than the same time last year at 43% and higher than that of our statistical neighbours at 53% and England data at 53%. Of the care leavers who are NEET, the main reasons are illness and pregnancy.
- The percentage of 19-21-year-old care leavers who were in suitable accommodation at the end of December was 89%. This compares favourably against the most recent statistical neighbour and national averages of 85%.

3.3 Key strengths and areas for focus and development

What is working well?

- A focused Improvement Board (Children and Young People's Partnership Board) is established, enabling a more strategic space for partnership discussion about how collectively to improve children's outcomes, with an aim of developing strengths-based and trauma-informed practice and greater inclusion. This began by agreeing a partnership vision statement for what North Somerset and partners are seeking to achieve for children and young people and has enabled more honest conversations and collaborative working.
- Newly formed, focused and positive leadership team building on the realignment of teams including the implementation of a new Head of Service structure in March 2021 to support a sense of collective purpose and to lead change.
- Caseloads for social workers remain manageable (average 14/15) although we are seeing a steady increase.
- Maintenance of a stable, supportive and committed workforce (agency rate 5%). Social care staff are positive about working in North Somerset.
- Extensive and well-regarded range of early years and early help services (now known as the Family Wellbeing Service). The remit of the family support workers

in the Family Wellbeing Service has been expanded from 0-5 to 0-19 (25 SEND). Family support workers are delivering parenting groups such as Mellow, Time to Shine, Non-violent reduction, Parent Plus Programmes for adolescents and children with SEN, working things out direct work with adolescents, Incredible Years, Caring Dads and Domestic Abuse groups. Family support workers are also in the Resettlement Teams, supporting refugees into North Somerset, working within our start to finish programmes helping integrate re-offenders back into society and also offer a drop-in group for advice and support with a multiagency approach. Since January family support workers have been on a rota to complete the missing children Return Home Interviews for children who are not in care and they will also provide a duty worker on the front door to work with multi-agency colleagues.

- Children's Centres offer a variety of groups for parents and children to attend for example muddy boots, construction fun and young parents. Health services and midwifery are co located in all localities along with local libraries Request for rooms and space from multiagency partners and voluntary sector are increasing to deliver services alongside us within our communities. Outreach work continues in partnership with community learning and local community projects to deliver services in hard-to-reach areas.
- Plans are underway to develop Family Hubs to coordinate multi-agency early help activity for children, young people and their families; our satellite and linked Family Hubs have been identified. As part of the plan for Family Hubs we have asked our young people what they want and they have told us, *'somewhere to get away from those who might encourage them to get in to trouble and someone to talk to'*. We are looking at setting up a space for young people in our hubs to enable us to provide this and develop trusted relationships.
- The redesign of the Family Wellbeing Service and the Front Door, working with North Tyneside as our Partner in Practice. The new service was launched in February 2021 and is providing stronger information, advice and signposting to professionals and the public (including a consultation line for professionals), as well as a single-entry point into targeted early help (family well-being service) and children's social care. The step-up/step-down process is working well. These streamlined front door processes enable more timely and responsive provision of support and ensure proportionate responses to children and families based on their needs. Further partnership development of the multi-agency safeguarding hub is underway.
- Focus on proportionate intervention and strength and relationship-based interventions. This has included using pre-proceedings to create the environment for change and the introduction of permanence tracking to prevent unnecessary drift and delay. The number of children in pre-proceedings for 3 months or more has decreased during 2021.
- The Children's System Governance Board chaired by the Director of Children's Services and Assistant Director is supporting the development of a practitioner led streamlined and effective recording system. The work completed to date has been focussed on the development of records for the Family Wellbeing Service and from January a workplan is in place for the statutory social work teams.

- Strengthened response to children missing via a weekly multi-agency meeting which maintains active oversight of our children who go missing most frequently and the intervention required. Plans are in place to extend this to include children at risk of or being exploited in January/February 2022.
- Appointment of a Young Director in the service; started in post in January 2022. Their role is to provide challenge to us as professionals in respect of the services we provide and ensure we maintain our focus on the lived experiences of children and young people.
- During 2021 we successfully applied for DfE Covid-19 Recovery Funding to increase and expand our use of the Mockingbird foster care model within the authority from 3 to 5 Hub carers and constellations. As the only LA in the South West who has fully implemented Mockingbird we were successful in our bid. The funding bid was also to work alongside the Fostering Network to support the development and roll-out of the Mockingbird model across 3 other Local Authorities within the Southwest Region: Devon, Dorset and South Gloucestershire. Confirmation was received in October that our bid was successful, and plans are now being worked up to ensure this initial roll-out (phase 1 of the bid) is in place by March 2022.
- At the end of January 2022, 13% of our children in care experienced 3 or more placement moves during the last 12 months. This is indicating a slight increase from 11% at the end of 2020/21 year however, it remains solid performance overall. We are increasingly utilising the skills of the Consult Team to good effect to assist young people, carers and involved practitioners to manage situations at an earlier stage to avoid escalation and unnecessary placement breakdown.
- Similarly, we are performing well in terms of long-term stability of placements. At the end of January 2022, our long-term stability indicator was 75%, which is higher than both our statistical neighbour and the national average and is an improvement over time.
- Our annual North Somerset Bright Spots survey for children in our care 2021 evidences the following areas of good practice:
 - Young people's trust in their carers is a strength.
 - 88% of children and young people reported that they 'always' felt safe in their placements which is higher than the overall population.

Relationships between children and their social worker:

- The level of trust in social workers was high. 100% of the youngest children (4-7yrs), 85% of children aged 8-11yrs; and 91% of young people (11-18yrs) trusted their social worker.
- 91% of young people (11-18yrs) reported that they could easily get in touch with their social worker 'all or most of the time' or 'sometimes'.
- Our Bright Spots survey, Your Life Beyond Care for Care Leavers 2021, evidences the following areas of strength and areas which have improved significantly since our last Your Life Beyond Care survey in 2019:

- Relationships between Care Leavers and their Leaving Care Personal Advisers (LCPA) have been consistently strong. Only 2 (3%) of care leavers 'hardly ever' or 'never' trusted their leaving care worker.
 - In 2021, 92% of Care Leavers reported it was easy to contact their LCPA.
- Involvement in the Regional Recovery Care Leavers Project. This project is focussed on the development of a regional offer for care leavers so they receive consistent support wherever they may live in the region.
 - Following a successful bid to the UK Community Renewal Fund we have secured 6 months funding for a part time Care Leavers Education, Employment and Training (EET) Worker. The post will be based in the Care Leavers Team working with Care Leavers who are not in education, training or employment and those who wish to explore betterment opportunities to enhance their careers. The post will work in partnership with Reboot, the Youth Opportunity Hub and Team North Somerset / Weston Works plus other partners supporting Care Leavers with EET.
 - Our Youth Justice Service (YJS) is an integral part of Children's Services. Since the Probation Inspectorate Inspection in September 2020 the Management Board has been revitalised in terms of membership and ownership following a period of turnover in agencies' representatives and the challenges posed to each agency through the impact of the pandemic. The YJS has a range of services and teams: Court and Community Supervision team, Avon & Somerset Enhanced Case Management Project, Substance Advice Service, Junction 21 Mentoring and Advocacy Service; Youth Inclusion Support Project, and the Education Diversion Project (September 2021 – March 22 pilot). The latter is already evidencing significant traction and engagement with academies. The YJS, since November 2021, has had the benefit of a CCG commissioned service from Sirona Care and Health of a Speech and Language Therapist for two days a week which is in response to the significant needs of many children and young people known to the YJS.

Areas for focus and development

- Continued pro-active recruitment activity to key management, social work and social care practitioner posts. Whilst our workforce is relatively stable, recruitment to these roles is increasingly challenging.
- Partnership refresh of the Early Help Strategy and review of the Effective Support Guidance to ensure that it reflects the partnership vision, the responsibilities of partners and Family Wellbeing Service for early help, and the model of practice.
- Development of a clear Practice Framework. We are committed to a strength and relational based model of practice using the tools and language of signs of safety. However, despite the considerable progress made, a strong and consistent model of practice is not yet well embedded or consistently applied. This model must be coherent with and supported by the forms on LCS (systems governance work

plan), a case audit system focused on better outcomes for children and a substantial learning and development programme, including for team managers.

- Development of a robust Quality Assurance Framework. Audit activity has been undertaken on a regular basis. Quality assurance activity in 2021 told us that development is required in the following practice areas:
 - consistency in the quality of case file auditing
 - active involvement of children in decisions about their lives, ensuring their voice is always central
 - evidencing good quality and impactful direct work with children and young people
 - to ensure chronologies are up to date and include only key significant events
 - ensuring evidence of reflective supervision and robust management oversight

A practice review week focussed on supervision was also undertaken in October 2021.

- Further work is underway to develop quality assurance activities which enable us to learn from what's working well, understand what needs to be done better and differently, including understanding how children and families experience our intervention. Actions will include:
 - development of a variety of quality assurance activity which enables us to understand the child's lived experience and are focussed on impact and outcomes
 - development of arrangements which support seeking consistent feedback from children and parents which is listened to, acted upon and informs practice developments
 - revision of the case audit form so it is aligned with the developing Practice Framework.
 - provision of training for auditors and moderators to enable them to improve the consistency and quality of audits and develop a shared understanding of what good looks like
 - closing the learning loop - sharing collated learning from quality assurance in teams to consider how practice can be improved to strengthen the quality of practice and staff learning and development.
- The Children with Disabilities Service requires further development, in tandem with the SEND improvements. This will include the development of a clear local offer, the development of care support services in the home and short break provision for children with a high-level need and the refresh of the Children with Disabilities Resource Panel. Support has been sought from the Local Government Association to achieve this.
- Strengthened management oversight and provision of high-quality, reflective supervision which is focussed on the child's lived experience and their needs, the impact of interventions and identifying outcome focussed actions and plans.

- Revision of decision-making system which evidences senior management oversight of decision making for children with the most complex needs (children who may need to come into care and children where pre-proceedings or care proceedings may need to be initiated). Plan in place to launch the Care and Resource Panel which will be chaired by the Assistant Director on 19th January.
- Continuing to support and equip social workers to develop strength and relational-based practice in planning and recording - working in partnership with families to develop plans which are focused on the change which needs to happen, how this can be achieved and how we will know when we get there.
- Develop a strategic, coordinated approach to exploitation and responding to risk outside the family across the North Somerset partnership. A needs assessment to enable an understanding of the picture across North Somerset has commenced.
- Continue to work with Education and Further Education colleagues to ensure more of our young people are in Education, Employment & Training (EET) and to narrow the gap in educational attainment for our children in care
- Significant work has been undertaken to strengthen corporate parenting arrangements and to support an improved understanding of the corporate parenting role across the council and the partnership. Learning events were held for elected members in 2021. Further work is ongoing to maintain the progress made and continue to develop the effectiveness of the panel.

4. Consultation

N/A

5. Financial Implications

N/A

Costs

N/A

Funding

N/A

6. Legal Powers and Implications

N/A

7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

N/A

8. Risk Management

N/A

9. Equality Implications

N/A

10. Corporate Implications

N/A

11. Options Considered

N/A

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Appendices:

North Somerset Children's Family Support and Safeguarding Strategic Plan

Background Papers: