

Addendum to the Commissioner report for the Secretary of State

Commissioner's update: April to August 2017

Senior leadership and Partnership with Leeds

In February, the previous Chief Executive left the authority as planned and his deputy became acting Chief Executive. In June, the Council confirmed this as a permanent appointment. This creates stability in the leadership of the Council going forward, and is important for children's services given the Chief Executive's clear commitment to developing the partnership with Leeds and creating the environment within the Council to provide corporate support to bring about the necessary changes.

In December, the previous Chief Executive of Kirklees Council appointed a longstanding Assistant Director to cover the DCS role on an interim basis. In February, the Council recruited two interim senior managers, one to cover the Service Director children's social care role and the other as Improvement Director. These arrangements were in place until July. During this period, a number of discussions took place between the political and officer leaderships of Kirklees and Leeds Council. Both Councils have approached those discussions in a constructive way, creating a very positive environment in which to develop the detailed proposals that are now necessary to secure the partnership.

In advance of this formal agreement, over the past few months, managers from Leeds Council have become involved in supporting Kirklees managers in key parts of the service. Initially this was within MASH and the front door but this has now been extended across the whole service.

During July, the Leeds DCS took over as DCS in Kirklees. He continues as the DCS at Leeds and will hold the role across both authorities, co-ordinating joint work and leading on the improvement of services for children, young people and families in Kirklees.

Quality of practice

There have been two monitoring visits by Ofsted during this period. The second one was in June and the letter following the visit has now been published. Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas:

- The effectiveness of multi-agency arrangements and decision-making to support children in need of help and protection, including children on the edge of care and children who have recently become looked after
- The quality of social work practice, including assessments and plans, with a focus on pre-proceedings and contingency planning

- Management, child protection chairs and/or independent reviewing officers oversight, support and challenge.

They concluded that the local authority is making limited progress in improving services for children and families. However, there is an increased understanding among senior leaders about what needs to improve for children and families in Kirklees. Plans to address the deficits are not firmly established or well understood and are too recent to have had an impact for children and families.

Although there are pockets of discrete improvement in the quality of practice, this is not consistent. The pace of change is being hindered by workforce instability and high social work caseloads. Not all actions taken by senior managers to tackle drift and delay for children have been effective, and some children have been left in risky situations for too long.

In spite of the challenges facing the authority, the staff observed carrying out their work and those with whom inspectors spoke were child focused and motivated to improve children's experiences. For some, though, morale is low.

Edge of care services for children in the cases reviewed by inspectors were either absent or ineffective, leading to increased pressure on social work provision. Senior managers are aware that the current model for service delivery is not effective in supporting families. Plans to implement an alternative delivery model are not fully formed. There were some improvements in the quality of assessments but not in the quality of care plans. Too many were poor with insufficient clarity of actions and timescales.

The multi-agency Improvement Board is now chaired by myself and is meeting monthly. The findings of Ofsted concur with my own view. The Board will focus on the issues raised and on the need to improve the pace of change. Partners, including the new chair of the LSCB, are very engaged in this and keen to support. Whilst there is some limited signs of improvement the performance data shows too many areas where this is not the case, for example in the holding of core groups within timescales, and required regular visits to children subject to child protection plans or looked after.

The new leadership from Leeds are reviewing the current Improvement Plan, and I am confident that in the next few months these issues will be addressed.

Workforce

The recruitment, retention and development of social workers and managers remains a high priority. Kirklees has commissioned the former Head of HR for Children's Services in Leeds on a full-time basis to support the Service to drive this forward. Recruitment remains ongoing and the proportion of agency staff has reduced slightly from its previous high.

There are some unresolved issues with Unison which have resulted in recent industrial action. The new DCS and his managers are now addressing these issues.

As discussed in my report, the replacement of the electronic case recording system is another key priority. However, with the agreement of the Improvement Board this has been further delayed till January 2018, pending the development of a new and essential social care model to underpin improved intervention with families.

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