

Report sponsor: Andy Smith, Strategic Director People Services

Report author: Suanne Lim, Director Early Help & Children's Social Care

## **Monitoring Safeguarding Practice**

### **Purpose**

- 1.1 The report provides an overview of the findings following Derby's Ofsted Focussed Visit of safeguarding practices with Children in Care that was undertaken in July 2021 (letter at appendix1).
- 1.2 The report also provides an overview of Derby's continuing response to COVID 19 and implications for safeguarding practice. Given that a stable and competent workforce is the pre-requisite for safeguarding children and young people and in driving forward improvements, this report also outlines current pressures and performance within the service.

### **Recommendation(s)**

- 2.1 To note the content of the report, current pressures and plans in place to address future challenges.

### **Reason(s)**

- 3.1 Maintaining a safe environment where good social work can flourish is dependent upon having sufficient, stable, competent and an experienced workforce and management.

### **Supporting information**

#### **4.1 Ofsted**

Children's services were last inspected in March 2017 when the overall effectiveness and services for children in care were judged to be good. The Focused Visit, part of the formal range of Ofsted inspections of children services, is not a judgement inspection. However, its' findings provide the context of a local authority's next judgement inspection and/ or be a trigger to implementing a judgement inspection sooner, where below standard or unsafe practice is found.

4.2 The visit examined experiences of our children in care focusing on:

- the quality of matching, placement and decision making for children in care and the experiences and progress of disabled children in care
- the quality of management oversight, challenge and staff supervision in these services and the effectiveness of corporate parenting
- whether performance management information and quality assurance activities provide managers with an accurate view of social work practice to help senior leaders improve outcomes for children.

4.3 Ofsted reviewed over 100 different pieces of supporting evidence prior to their on-site inspection. The inspection was held over two days and comprised the following,

- interviewing ten social workers from a cross-section of our service areas, to examine the experiences of children the service is currently working with
- interviewing Independent Reviewing Officers
- sampling cases of children and young people within all types of placement and those who have recently entered care
- meeting with children in care, who are members of our Children in Care Council
- interviewing the Cabinet Member for Children Services, the Director of Children's Services, Cafcass and the Courts regarding governance, resources and partnership.

4.4 The findings were that senior leaders in Derby have continued to provide effective oversight of services for children in care. Strong performance had been sustained in the areas focused upon. Ofsted found that most children are in placements which meet their needs and are supported by social workers who visit them regularly and understand their needs. Ofsted acknowledged that there has been a steady increase in the numbers of children in care and that placement sufficiency remains a constant challenge, particularly for children with complex needs. However, Ofsted were satisfied in response to this demand and found senior leaders had a comprehensive placement sufficiency strategy and plan.

4.5 In particular, the key areas of strength identified were

- An effective response to COVID -19
- Staff received strong and effective support from senior leaders and frontline managers, which has helped them to continue working with children
- Children in Care Council told inspectors the pandemic has had little impact upon the service they receive
- Children come into care when this is the right decision for them, and needs are met
- Most children in care benefit from regular visits by their social workers including those within the Integrated Disabled Children's Service.
- A great majority of children have built positive and trusting relationships with Independent Reviewing Officers.
- Children's emotional well-being and mental health needs are well considered by social workers and in children looked after reviews.
- Children's services had an effective learning and improvement framework.

- Corporate parenting demonstrates achievements
- Staff benefit from mostly regular supervision and most records demonstrate that the new strengths-based practice model is beginning to be embedded, which is helping to increase reflection and analysis of the impact of intervention for children.

#### 4.6 The areas identified for development are

- Assessment information about children's needs does not always translate into comprehensive care plans
- Some children do not have sufficiently detailed care plans with specific outcomes and timescales to help monitor children's progress
- Life-story work and understanding family history(chronologies)
- Social worker caseloads for some staff are higher than they would want them to be.

In response to this, the service has created a development action plan which is monitored at the Practice and Development Board, chaired by the Director of Children's Services. The next inspection will be a full Inspection (of) Local Authority Children's Services, ILACS, and this is expected in Spring 2022.

#### 4.7 COVID

The service continues successful progression of its recovery and restoration plan with rotation of social work teams now common place across all venues. All offices are subject to risk assessment signed off by the council's Health and Safety policy group and deemed COVID secure. Direct contact with children, young people and their families has fully resumed with virtual contact by exception only. However, the majority of multi-agency meetings have been retained and will continue as virtual. This provides both efficiency and accessibility for partners. Where parents are required to participate, such as in Child Protection Conferences, these are held in a hybrid way with parent, social worker and Child Protection Manager in a physical meeting and multi-agency partners contributing through virtual connection. This is working well.

#### 4.8 Pressures and Performance

Initial contact for service by partners and the general public shows consistent rise in 2021 when comparing overall activity to that of 2020. All initial contacts are received by the Reception Service of Early Help and Children's Social Care. Each individual contact is considered by a social worker and manager and a decision is made regarding outcome. This could range from signposting to Early Help or direct assessment and intervention. Comparing 2020 data shows the extent of demand increase in 2021.

2020		2021		Increase
Mar Total	1637	Mar Total	2498	52%
Apr Total	1476	Apr Total	2258	52%
May Total	1515	May Total	2462	62%
Jun Total	2043	Jun Total	2704	32%
Jul Total	1884	Jul Total	2415	28%
Aug Total	1626	Aug Total	2050	26%

Despite this significant increase experienced, the service overall is maintaining strong performance against national Key Performance Indicators.

Performance	August 2021	6 Month Average
% Children in Care visits in timescale	91.2%	91.1%
% Children in Care reviews in timescale	98.6%	99.6%
% Child Protection visits in timescale	80%	81%
% Child Protection reviews in timescale	83.7%	87.6%
% Children in Need reviews in timescale	100%	99.1%
% Single Assessments (first) in timescale	86.1%	88.6%

Derby's social care workforce has remained resilient and strong throughout the pandemic and provided exceptional service delivery in the face of COVID uncertainty and continue to do so. However, this has not been without some impact. The social worker establishment is beginning to experience some rise in long term sickness absence and the level of maternity leave has also increased to all time high. Together with a small vacancy turnover, this has resulted in the need for additional agency social worker reliance. Derby currently has 22 agency social workers covering the equivalent of 23 posts. The social work establishment is 133 FTE in total. In comparison to May 2021, there were no long term absent social workers and need for only 13 agency social workers.

In respect to rising absence, this is not unique to Derby. All workers have access to the Council's well-established First Care services and there is significant welfare support provided by respective line managers. Senior leaders are continually working with multi agency partners in respect of immediate and longer-term demand management and in the context of overall COVID recovery planning.

In response to this, Derby continues to maintain its recruitment strategy and open advert. Significant success has been achieved through delivery of apprenticeships and Step up to social work programmes in conjunction with Derby and Nottingham University. Derby currently has three apprentices, with further two planned for 2022, and four step up to social work students. There are also 20 newly qualified social workers being supported during their first year of qualification of which seven completed and remained in service as of August 2021.

#### **4.9 Children's Homes**

The local authority has four children's homes, three providing mainstream placements and one specialist home for children with a disability. All homes remained open during COVID and were compliant with the statutory flexibility arrangements under the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 ("Amendment Regulations") between 24 April 2020 and 30 September 2021.

- 4.10 To assure of safeguarding, all homes were subject to formal risk assessment in relation to keeping young people safe. This outlined requirement to social distance, staffing capacity, protection of exposure to external contact through implementation of virtual contact. No new admissions were accepted and no young people were relocated during the critical first six months. Young people were spoken with regarding this requirement needing to be implemented for their own safety and that of staff. Young people were able to speak privately over the telephone or other video-link facility with family and professionals where needed. The homes implemented virtual independent visiting through video-link and telephone following risk discussion between the head of service, Principal Service Manager and Homes Managers. Direct visits by Regulation 44 auditors recommenced in October 2020.
- 4.11 Senior leaders have maintained direct contact with the homes during the pandemic through regular reports of the Head of Service, Children's Residential. When it was sufficiently safe to do so, the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and Director of Children's Services undertook a monitoring visit in May 2021 to one of the homes and the Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care also undertook monitoring visits in August and September 2021.

#### **Public/stakeholder engagement**

- 5.1 There is an ongoing programme of engagement with social work staff and managers to ensure a direct line of sight and communication between senior managers and the front line.

#### **Other options**

- 6.1 There is openness to exploring all options to improve safeguarding practice.

#### **Financial and value for money issues**

- 7.1 Staffing pressures across children's social workers are £0.829m, of which £0.566m is an emerging pressure due to the use of Agency social workers.

#### **Legal implications**

- 8.1 Local Authorities have a legal responsibility to provide sufficient social workers to act as key workers to children in care, children subject to child protection plans and to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect and to assess children in need.

## Climate implications

9.1 None identified.

## Other significant implications

10.1 None identified.

This report has been approved by the following people:

Role	Name	Date of sign-off
Legal	Olu Idowu HOS Legal Services	07/10/2021
Finance	Janice Hadfield HOS Finance	07/10/2021
Service Director(s)	Suanne Lim, Service Director Early Help & Children's Social Care	03/10/2021
Report sponsor Other(s)	Andy Smith Strategic Director of People	04/10/2021
Background papers: List of appendices:	Appendix 1 – Ofsted Focused Visit Letter 9 August 2021	