

16 June 2014

Agenda Item: 5

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, YOUTH, FAMILIES AND CULTURE

**NOTTINGHAMSHIRE CHILDREN'S SERVICES QUALITY ASSURANCE
FRAMEWORK**

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide an update on outcomes from activity undertaken within the Children's Services Quality Assurance Framework in the period January to March 2014 (quarter 4).

Information and Advice

2. In October 2013, the Children and Young People's Committee approved the Nottinghamshire Children's Services Quality Assurance Framework. The Framework is intended to bring consistency to the service specific Quality Frameworks already in place in the department, notably in Children's Social Care and Targeted Support and Youth Justice, and covering the family support services provided on the Council's behalf by Nottinghamshire Children and Families Partnership. The Framework outlines a range of activities to be undertaken by services in order to provide assurance on the quality of provision, including the experience of children and families, and to identify any actions necessary to secure service improvements and improved outcomes for children and young people.
3. This first report covering activity undertaken within the Framework will cover:
 - outcomes from case file audit activity
 - service user feedback
 - engagement of Elected Members and senior officers in quality assurance
4. Future reports will cover other strands of the Framework including feedback from staff and partners, learning from complaints and practice observation.

Outcomes from case file audit activity

Children's Social Care

5. 320 audits were completed and graded by Children's Social Care managers in quarter 4. Cases audited included children in need, children on child protection

plans, and looked after children. Of the cases audited, 82% were judged to be adequate or good, and 18% inadequate. These grades are comparable to those in quarter 3. It should be noted that an inadequate grading does not indicate that a child is at risk of harm. When an inadequate judgement is made, the case holding team manager will receive a copy of the audit in order that they can promptly review the case and put together an action plan to address any issues raised. All inadequate cases are reported to the Social Care Divisional Leadership Team on a quarterly basis and progress is tracked by the Social Work Practice Support Service. Where a particular practice issue has been identified, the Practice Consultants are deployed to support improvements, for example through providing mentoring, briefings, or jointly working cases.

Whilst the data from audits undertaken in 2013/14 does not indicate an improvement in terms of the percentage of audits graded as good or better, it is considered that as the auditing process has become embedded and the service has improved, the threshold for what constitutes 'good' practice has increased. Over the coming year, a moderation exercise will take place in order to ensure that gradings are consistently being applied by auditors. The service is committed to appropriate challenge in support of ongoing improvement.

6. In terms of good practice identified through the quarter 4 case file audit process, it is notable that in 98% of cases, the divisional standard in relation to "working together with children, young people, their parents or carers and other agencies to achieve positive outcomes" was met. In terms of areas for improvement identified, these include:
 - compliance with legislative timescales (the practice standard was not met in 27% of fieldwork cases)
 - management oversight (the practice standard was not met in 19% of fieldwork cases)
 - case recording, particularly in relation to chronologies and life story work for looked after children.
7. These issues will be addressed by the responsible managers through team meetings and supervision.
8. From quarter 1 of 2014/15, a new model of case file audit is being introduced. This requires the auditor to hold a conversation with the social worker and their manager, in addition to scrutinising case records on Framework-i. It is envisaged that this more dynamic approach will improve the impact of the audit process by providing the social worker and their manager the opportunity to reflect on their practice and identified actions for improvements.

Targeted Support Service

9. A total of 101 targeted support cases were audited in quarter 4, to assess adherence to the service's operating model, focussing on the quality of assessment and action plan, intervention and overall outcomes. Of the cases

audited, 59% were judged to be good or outstanding, compared with 52% in quarter 3. 9% of cases were judged to be inadequate in quarter 4 compared with 18% in quarter 3. This indicates an overall improvement in the quality of practice. This has been achieved through a number of measures including collating audit trends for both teams and individual practitioners, so that team managers are able to address practice issues with individual practitioners, and providing training and development opportunities.

10. Where good practice was identified, this was reflected in the quality of the assessment and action plan which incorporated the voice of the young person or parent/carer and evidence of strong multi-agency working. In good or outstanding cases there was evidence of positive change for the young person or their family as a result of the intervention undertaken.
11. Areas for improvement identified in quarter 4 echo those from previous quarters. These include:
 - quality of analysis informing assessments and planning
 - quality of case recording.
12. Training for new practitioners on general assessment skills is planned, supported by development sessions for more experienced practitioners on analytical skills and developing plans and interventions in response to assessed need/risk. These events are scheduled over the coming 6 months. Recording guidance for practitioners will also be developed, in line with the approach adopted by Children's Social Care.

Nottinghamshire Children and Families Partnership (NCFP) – Family Support Work

13. A total of 235 family support cases were audited in quarter 4. NCFP does not currently grade case audits; this will be instigated as part of the quarter 1 audit process for 2014/15. Good practice identified in quarter 4 included strong multi-agency working using the Common Assessment Framework, appropriate escalation to level 4 services when needed and strong presence of the parents' voice in case recording, with evidence of a range of tools being used to capture children's voices. Particularly good audits demonstrate impact of interventions on outcomes for the child.
14. Areas for improvement identified in quarter 4 echo those highlighted by the Targeted Support Service and Children's Social Care in relation to case recording (e.g. chronologies) and quality of analysis within assessments. Embedding use of the Family Star tool by all Family Support Workers will enable better quality assessments and tracking of progress in terms of outcomes. Use of SystemOne as the single case management system for all children's centres will improve the consistency of case recording.
15. A further area for improvement was identified in relation to management oversight of cases when Family Support Workers are supporting families across different clusters of Children's Centres. This is being addressed by the management team.

Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

16. In quarter 4, 15 CAFs were audited, of which four were judged to be of good quality, nine to require improvement and two to be inadequate. In neither of the inadequate cases were children judged to be at risk of harm. The CAFs audited represent 14% of those CAFs undertaken by agencies other than Targeted Support and Children's Centres, for example, schools.
17. Good practice highlighted included use of tools such as 'My Feelings' to ensure that the voice of the child is reflected in the assessment. Areas for improvement included ensuring that multi-agency plans are SMART and link to needs identified through the assessment process. The recent implementation of the Early Help Assessment Form (EHAF), action plan and supporting guidance to replace the CAF should enable improved quality of support to children and families in need of early help. Early feedback indicates that the EHAF has been well received, particularly by schools. Priority now needs to be given to putting in place a workforce development offer for practitioners who need to improve their skills in relation to assessment and planning.

Future Developments

18. From quarter 1 2014-15, a more standardised approach to case file auditing is being implemented across this range of services, with consistent use of grades in line with the Ofsted framework. Learning from the audits will also be considered collectively, in order to identify any workforce development activity or practice improvement work that is required across the range of children's services to drive improved practice, and critically, improved outcomes for children and young people.
19. Additionally, services within the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Policy and Provision Group have developed a quality management framework, including a case audit regime for the Education, Health and Care Plan arrangement. This will be implemented in the next quarter.

Feedback from children, young people and families

Children's Social Care

20. In December 2013 and January 2014 a new quarterly arrangement was put in place for ascertaining feedback from children, young people and families who have had recent experience of the child protection process. Fourteen activity-based interviews took place with children and young people aged from 6 to 18 years, all of whom had Protection Plans which had ended in the previous month. Parents/carers of the children and young people were invited to complete a questionnaire as part of the process, and four chose to do this. Key themes to emerge from the interviews with children and young people include:

- their experience of very positive relationships with social workers (notably when they have one consistent worker)
 - children do have a concept of being safe, and all now report feeling safe and happy
 - children's understanding of Child Protection processes was generally satisfactory
 - children's participation in the Child Protection process was a more confusing picture. Some had attended, some had contributed and a small minority did not appear to have a clear (age appropriate) understanding
 - the vast majority of children would not change anything nor had ideas of improvements to be made
 - one child who has had eight social workers gave an eloquent plea regarding what she would like done differently.
21. A number of the children expressed an interest in meeting other children with similar experiences. To facilitate this, a workshop will be organised to allow children to collate their feedback, and create their own leaflet for circulation to all social workers and team managers. This will be a powerful message, using the children's own words. A leaflet will also be produced for other children starting their own child protection journey. Finally, three messages will be highlighted every quarter and shared with social workers. In this first quarter, positive descriptions of social workers were highlighted:
- *'(the social worker) did the right things to help her feel safe. She talked us through it and made me feel like it wasn't my fault'*
 - *'She's nice and kind. She's always honest. She's been straight with me. I have always understood her. She made the right choice for me to be living where I am'.*
22. Additionally, one area to work on was noted:
- *'They sometimes said "I will sort things out" when they never did/got round to it'*

Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans

23. In February 2014, telephone interviews were carried out with a 15% sample of parents/carers of children with an EHC Plan to find out how they were finding the process so far. All of those interviewed reported that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the overall process, and felt that 'The Plan' reflected their child's situation and the outcomes they and their child wanted. They also noted that the EHC coordinators were approachable, understanding and good at organising and chairing meetings.
24. In terms of areas for development, 67% did not know about the local offer, although this was felt in part to reflect the fact that it only 'went live' in December 2013. A number of respondents reported that the EHC Plan was

still focussed heavily on education and that there was a lack of clarity about the expected involvement of health and social care. Finally, 86% noted that they were not informed about personal budgets, and did not know how they could be used to support their child.

25. An action plan to address the improvement themes has been developed (communication with parents/carers, professional understanding of the EHC process, knowledge of personal budgets and administration of the process) and progress against these areas will be reported to the Pathfinder Board. Additionally, a mechanism to establish regular service user feedback is being set up.

Early Help Unit

26. In February 2014, 25 people who had contacted the Early Help Unit either for advice and guidance or to make a referral were interviewed by telephone. This represents a sample of approximately 5%. Interviewees included parents/carers, a young person, and professional referrers. Positive feedback gathered through the process included:

- all respondents were complimentary about the staff in the Early Help Unit, saying they were polite and helpful in responding to their queries and in taking referrals
- the majority of respondents received appropriate feedback on their referral on time and through their preferred contact method
- the majority of respondents felt that the Early Help Unit is a good point of contact to access and find more out more information about Early Help Services.

27. Key improvement themes identified include:

- communicating the work of the Early Help Unit to children, young people and families: When asked to participate in a questionnaire about the Early Help Unit, some respondents did not understand what this was and thought that their request for information, advice or a service was dealt with by social services
- the evidence required to make a referral: some practitioners felt that since the establishment of the Early Help Unit, they have had to provide more supporting evidence when making a referral. They felt that this was not always clearly communicated to them from the start and resulted in delays to making a referral. Practitioners who felt this way said that clear guidance from the start of the process would be helpful. The creation of 'how to guides' was suggested
- thresholds and criteria: some practitioners had an issue with the thresholds and criteria to access services, particularly around attendance concerns.

There was some tension around what they expected from the early help service.

28. Where necessary, actions to address these themes have been picked up in the Implementation Plan following the Early Help Unit Review, and will be tracked the Early Help Executive. Additionally, a multi-agency audit of early help cases that have been progressed through the Early Help Unit has recently been undertaken and the outcomes from this audit are due to be reported to the Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board on 9 June 2014.

Engagement of Elected Members and senior officers in quality assurance

29. Since the establishment of the department's quality assurance framework, the following activities have taken place:
- Elected Members and senior officers have undertaken visits to internal and external residential children's homes, (including two out of area placements), to supplement routine monitoring visits
 - Elected Members and senior officers have undertaken visits to district offices and functions including the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Early Help Unit
 - Corporate and Service Directors have started undertaking case file audits, across both Early Help and Social Care. These involve discussions with the case holding practitioner, manager and Independent Chair (where appropriate)
 - Elected Members and senior officers have shadowed social workers to gain a better understanding of the reality of front line practice
 - Elected Members and senior officers have attended the No Labels Children in Care Council and attended the social work staff forum.
30. These activities have informed discussion at the Scrutiny of Safeguarding Board, which is chaired by the Chief Executive and attended by the Principal Child and Family Social Worker, Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and Lead Elected Members. The Board has met twice in order that the Chief Executive can receive direct feedback in relation to the current strengths and issues within safeguarding services, thus enabling him to provide sufficient support and challenge to senior officers within the department. He has done this through follow up meetings with the Corporate Director and Service Director for Children's Social Care. Key areas of scrutiny in the first meetings have included concern about the stability of the social work workforce, particularly in assessment and child protection teams; the need for positive recognition of the challenging job that social workers do in protecting our most vulnerable children, and the request for increased scrutiny on the attainment of looked after children and young people. An update will be provided on these areas in the next quality assurance report to Committee.

Summary

31. The cross-departmental quality assurance framework is relatively recent in its implementation. Emerging cross-service themes arising from the range of quality assurance activity undertaken include:
 - improving the quality of assessment, including analysis
 - the need to ensure that clear information about services and access routes is available to children, young people and their families, and professionals working with them.
32. The department's workforce development plan will prioritise activity to improve the quality of assessments, for example, through targeted training, such as the Safeguarding Analysis and Assessment Framework research project in social care.
33. A project has been initiated to better coordinate and present information about the range of services available to children, young people and families on the Council's web pages.
34. An update on both of these areas will be included in the next quality assurance report to Committee.

Future Developments

35. Over the coming year, as the framework becomes more embedded, the intention is to ensure that reporting against the framework becomes more focussed upon the impact of quality assurance activity on the experience of children and families, and in particular the impact on improving outcomes.
36. Additionally, the intention is to implement a more integrated approach to quality assurance that focuses on the holistic experience of children and families of the range of services that they receive from services within the department. This will be achieved through the development of approaches such as themed Challenge Days, comprising case discussions, focus groups and interviews with service users.

Other Options Considered

37. The report is for noting only.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

38. The report is for noting only.

Statutory and Policy Implications

39. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, finance, human resources, human rights, the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, service users,

sustainability and the environment and ways of working and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the outcomes from activity undertaken within the Children's Services Quality Assurance framework on the period January to March 2014 (quarter 4) be noted.

Derek Higton
Service Director: Youth Families & Culture

For any enquiries about this report please contact:

Jon Hawketts
Group Manager: Quality and Improvement
T: 0115 9773696
E: jon.hawketts@nottsc.gov.uk

Constitutional Comments

40. As this report is for noting only, no Constitutional Comments are required.

Financial Comments (KLA 29/05/14)

41. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Nottinghamshire children's services quality assurance framework – report to Children and Young People's Committee on 14 October 2013

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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