

Havering Children's Services Improvement Board

Background

The Children's Services Improvement Board met for the first time on 29 April 2014. It was established to take ownership of and drive forward the improvement agenda across Children's Services; replacing and subsuming the LAC Improvement Group and Ofsted Steering Group and taking responsibility for overseeing and prioritising the myriad of action and improvement plans currently impacting on the service.

The new Board includes representatives from Children's Services, Learning and Achievement, Business and Performance and Public Health as well as the new Children's Commissioner jointly appointed and funded by the London Borough of Havering and Havering Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). It is currently meeting fortnightly in order to maintain appropriate pace and momentum around the improvement agenda.

Activity to date

Since its inception, the new Children's Services Improvement Board has been monitoring delivery of the action plan arising from the last Ofsted inspection, which was carried out in early 2013. Progress against this action plan is the subject of a separate report on this agenda.

As set out above, the Children's Services Improvement Board has also taken over from the previous Ofsted Steering Group in overseeing the Council's preparations for its first inspection under the new Single Inspection Framework. This has included:

- Completing a self-assessment of the Council's current position against the grade descriptors included in the new inspection framework;
- Overseeing progress towards ensuring that all the core statutory documents that the Council will be required to produce under inspection are available, up to date and of the required quality;
- Tracking the themes and learning emerging from inspections of other local authorities and ensuring that the London Borough of Havering responds to these where required;
- Agreeing the approach to be taken to and carried out an initial "dummy run" of the case file self-audit process that will be required as part of an inspection, and
- Selecting practice audits to be shared with inspectors as and when the Council's inspection commences.

An acknowledgement of the increased volume and complexity of cases being dealt with within Children's Social Care also led the Board to analyse drivers of the increased demand on the service during the last financial year. This highlighted a number of data quality issues that are now being dealt with, as well as the high proportion (30%) of assessments resulting in no further action. Further analysis indicated that this is due to the assessment team completing assessments at both tiers 3 and 4 due to lack of capacity within Early Help services as well as in external services to deal with tier 3 referrals and assessments. An internal review is now considering how this might best be addressed.

The Board has also considered the findings of the Social Workers' Health Check Survey undertaken in June 2014. This highlighted, among other things, that only 62% of respondents had received an induction when they commenced work for the Council, along with inconsistencies in the identification of opportunities to engage in reflective practice across the service and a perceived lack of opportunities to engage with the Principal Social Worker (though it was acknowledged that there are limits with what can reasonably be achieved within the current 0.4 FTE post). The findings also revealed a perceived lack of opportunities for progression within the service.

During its first two months of operation the Board has also:

- Reviewed the 2013/14 end of year performance report for Children's Service in order to help identify priority areas for improvement and the role that the Children's Services Improvement Board can play in addressing these;
- Received updates on progress against the adoption scorecard, following the DfE's visit to the borough earlier this year;
- Agreed and tracked the progress of actions arising from the recent external audit of 26 out of borough LAC case files;
- Considered the quarterly quality assurance report, and
- Been consulted on the development of key strategy documents such as the Young Carers Strategy and Transitions Protocol.

What difference has the Board made?

Despite having only been in operation for just over two months, the new Children's Services Improvement Board has already had a positive impact in a number of ways. For example:

- A data quality (DQ) group has been established to address the various DQ issues identified. 15 individual data quality reports are now also being sent out on a regular (either weekly or monthly) basis to service managers in Children's Services to highlight data quality issues needing to be addressed within the service and also to draw their attention to issues such as overdue assessments / visits; assessments and visits becoming due etc. This in turn assists managers in preparing for and delivering their team meetings and supervision sessions.
- The Board's review of the end of year performance report led to an investigatory piece of work being undertaken to understand better the reasons for delays in completing assessments. This revealed that assessments delays are often caused by delays in receipt of information from partner agencies, so more detailed analysis is currently being carried out in order that this matter can be referred to a future meeting of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). It is also acknowledged that staff within Children's Services may need to be more pragmatic in closing assessments, particularly now that assessment is a more ongoing process throughout the child's journey. Children's Services are also considering whether it might be appropriate to introduce a form of "lighter" assessment for some cases, in order both to improve the timeliness of assessments and also to ensure that children and families are not always subjected to full core assessments in cases that are likely to result in no further action.
- The Board's review of the end of year performance report as well as its analysis of the drivers of demand on Children's Social Care led to enhancements being made to the monthly performance pack that is discussed by the Children's Services Management Team. For instance, the pack now includes a breakdown of Child in Need (CIN) Plans by ward, as well as the numbers of children starting and ceasing to be looked after during the month, rather than simply the number of Looked After Children at the end of the month (which is what was previously reported). This assists managers within Children's Services to gain a deeper insight into the total volume of activity undertaken by their respective teams and to allocate resources appropriately.
- Reviews of performance data and self-assessments have identified the efficiency and effectiveness of a number of processes in use within the service to be impediments to progress. An admin review has therefore been scheduled to take place next year, to look at which tasks administrative staff can perform on behalf of social workers, both to improve the quality and consistency of recording but also to free up social worker capacity to engage in direct work with children and families. The service is also exploring the possibility of carrying out a "lean review" of some of its processes in the late summer / early autumn to help address this.
- The findings of the recent Social Workers' Health Check Survey have led to further work being done on the development of the induction process for social workers. The feedback is also being used to inform the future development of the role of the Principal Social Worker as this is taken forward as a full time post. Meanwhile, concerns regarding the perceived lack of

opportunities for progression will be addressed through a new Social Worker Career Progression Scheme that has recently been consulted on.

- The “dummy run” of the case file self-audit process that will need to be undertaken under inspection was considered to be so useful that it is now to be repeated at six-weekly intervals.
- The outcomes of the audit work and self-assessments undertaken by the Board have prompted a task and finish review of the post-qualifying and mandatory training for social workers to ensure that this is better aligned to priority areas for improvement and continuous professional development (CPD) across the service. The conclusions of this will also be fed back to the LSCB to inform the multi-agency LSCB training programme.
- As a result of the Board’s consideration of the Quarter 4 Quality Assurance Report for 2013/14, work is also underway to analyse the characteristics of children coming into care who have had a previous plan as well as those of children subject to a Child Protection Plan for a second or subsequent time within two years, in order to assess if there are any features that they share that make conference decisions to de-plan them (potentially too early) more common. The outcomes of this work are due to be fed back to the Children’s Services Improvement Board in August.

Planned future activity

Now that the self-assessment against the new Ofsted grade descriptors has been completed, the next steps will be to develop this baseline into an action plan for improvement and also to keep the self-assessment updated as further progress is made.

Having considered the drivers of demands on Children’s Social Care over the past year, the Board has now also commissioned a small sub-group to model projected future demands on Children’s Services, in order to inform resource allocation (both human and financial). The group will look initially at population projections by ward and estimate what this will mean in terms of numbers of children requiring early help and going through the child protection system, care proceedings etc. It will also be undertaking an initial deeper piece of work focused on IFA placements, looking specifically at which children could have been placed in-house if the Council had the resource and how much this could potentially save under a number of different scenarios. If this approach is seen to add value, it will then be rolled out to other parts of Children’s Services.

Following identification of the high proportion of contacts progressing to assessment as an area warranting further investigation, work will also be undertaken within Children’s Services to review the management of Early Help and Tier 3 Assessments, with recommendations being reported back to the Board.

The Forward Plan for the Children’s Services Improvement Board also currently includes:

- Consideration of the quarterly Viewpoint reports, to identify the learning and actions arising from them;
- Finalisation of the Workforce Strategy that is currently being developed for Children’s Services;
- A further Social Worker Health Check Survey to be carried out in the autumn to help assess the progress that has been made against the themes identified in the initial survey, and
- The development of an overarching LAC Strategy for the borough