

Gail Quinton  
Director of Children's Services  
Worcestershire County Council  
County Hall  
Spetchley Road  
Worcester  
WR5 2NP

29<sup>th</sup> May 2015

Dear Gail

## **RE: CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING PEER REVIEW**

Thank you for taking part in the Children's Safeguarding Peer Review during the period 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> April 2015. The team received a good welcome and co-operation and support throughout the process. It was evident to us all that all those we met, from right across the partnership, were interested in learning and continued development.

We agreed to send you a letter confirming our findings. As you know the safeguarding review focused on five key themes:

- Vision, strategy and leadership
- Effective practice, service delivery and the voice of the child
- Outcomes, impact and performance management
- Working together (including LSCB and Health and Wellbeing Board)
- Capacity and managing resources

Within these overall areas, you asked the team to explore the following issues to assist in your on-going improvement plan:

- Has Worcestershire got the right structures, systems, processes and management focus to deliver for children's social care services moving forward - with a view on the transformation programme currently being implemented?
- Are the current strategies and plans for improvement having impact and are they the right strategies and plans in terms of sustainability?
- A perspective on the leadership and culture of children's social care services in promoting good outcomes for children and young people – are the values, principles and behaviours having an impact?

- Is the Corporate support right?
- A view on the financial strategy for children's services in terms of sustainability going forward?
- External validation of quality assurance framework and audit activity.
- In the context of the audit validation, challenge of the quality of front-line practice specifically focusing on how the front door is working.
- A view on the multi-agency partnerships and partners engagement with supporting the improvement of outcomes for children and families

This letter sets out our findings on these areas including the areas of strengths identified and the areas for further consideration. It is important to stress again that this was not an inspection. The team of peers used their experience to reflect on the evidence you presented on safeguarding vulnerable children and young people. All the documentary evidence provided to us was used in our focus on assisting you in your on-going improvement.

You decided to take up the optional element of a Case Records Review which was completed over two days prior to the main review. The report for the case records review evaluates the quality of casework, care planning and supervision and is appended to this letter. In particular, the case records review, linked to your own multi-agency case file audit process (MACFA), validated many of the peer teams findings in relation to frontline safeguarding practice as detailed in the 'Effective Practice, Service Delivery & Voice of the Child' theme in this letter. The evidence we obtained from these elements contributed to the team's overall findings, which also included evidence from interviews and focus groups with staff and partners.

## **Executive Summary**

The review covered the five key LGA Safeguarding Children themes and included specific requests from Worcestershire to look at particular issues. The team benefited from detailed case audits undertaken by the local multi-agency audit team (MACFA), an independent case records review, thorough analysis of performance data, interviews, focus groups and visits. A summary of feedback relating to each of the key themes is provided below:

The team was impressed by the extent of corporate ownership of and ambition for children's services within the council. This comes from the top – both the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive have clear strategic aspirations for the county, are champions for change and have identified children's services as a major priority. Whilst existing strategies may have the right focus, achieving a shared understanding throughout the workforce is more challenging and the required culture change is not yet embedded at every level. There is a need to create a whole service perspective especially within Children's Social Care. In particular, demand management strategies around early help and edge of Care are not having the desired impact and the CSE strategy appears to be embryonic. Opportunities to innovate could be grasped and driven forward with appropriate risk management.

In terms of effective practice and service delivery this is the area where there needs to be a sustained focus. Although the council have identified from their own audits that there is still more work to be done in improving consistency in the application of thresholds the team observed good practice and could see evidence of improvement in timely decision making and the application of appropriate thresholds, in the Access Centre, in relation to telephone referrals observed during the site visit. It was also pleasing to hear that the voice of the child is now more clearly evidenced in case files and the team enjoyed meeting the Children in Care council. Supervision for social workers is happening regularly and staff were generally positive about the support and direction from managers.

However there are a number of areas where there is a need for improvement. This includes further development of the 'front door' to access services from children's social care and early help. The concept of a unified door front door is a good one and the staff are keen to realise it; driving this forward alongside implementing the MASH has the potential to both improve services for children and assist the council in its demand management. Evidence of reflective and analytical thinking was not consistent in the case audits reviewed by the peer team and this was reinforced by feedback from discussion groups. This is having a variable impact on practice.

The council has identified issues in respect of basic safeguarding practice that need to be resolved to improve the timeliness of responses, prevent drift and ensure good planning and management oversight; these concerns are shared by the peer review team. These issues persist into planning for permanence with a need to ensure good assessment and planning in respect of children in Care, clear gatekeeping arrangements and strong strategic leadership.

There are examples of good practice having a direct impact and there are good quality assurance mechanisms in place (e.g. MACFA); the council's level of self-awareness and openness is impressive. The aspirations of the recent service redesign in children's social care, however, are not yet being realized. Although the underpinning principles of the re-design are laudable, leaders need to respond flexibly to new challenges as they emerge e.g. implementation of flexible working, case handover for children in care and the team manager role. Good quality assurance needs a feedback loop if it is to have traction and drive improvement. Whilst some commissioned early help services are now able to demonstrate impact, the wider early help strategy could more effectively engage partners.

There is widespread partner involvement and sign up to children's services and many partners contributed to the review, demonstrating positive relationships, especially at front line level. Partners could do more to ensure there is strong collective accountability for safeguarding across the partnership and develop the level of scrutiny, challenge and focus offered by the Children's Safeguarding Board (WSCB). This may tackle some perceived delays in progressing key multi-agency projects e.g., the MASH. The Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB) also has potential to drive integration across family services. The WSCB has all the appropriate plans

in place but could do more to drive improvement. It should accelerate its plans for re-organisation, ensure swift decision making and challenge in areas such as early help.

The council has strong corporate ownership of the children's services agenda and this is evidenced through the way in which support services have prioritised the service. There has been strong workforce development which has resulted in recruitment of many new social workers, flexible working has been enabled and there is good analytical support. The council recognises its financial challenges and has invested considerable funding into cost pressures. Nevertheless challenges remain - numbers of children in Care are relatively high and existing plans need to be of realistic duration, the workforce is committed but inexperienced and there are key pressure points. There is potential to integrate commissioning to drive change and ensure good use of resources, particularly in relation to Public Health, but also with existing work on CAMHs and early help.

In summary, the council can clearly demonstrate its commitment to improving outcomes for children and is realistic about the challenges it faces. It has the opportunity now, working with partners, to embed recent changes, support more integrated commissioning e.g. by testing whether early help services are sufficiently targeted, and drive further innovation whilst also focusing on basic safeguarding practice. The financial challenges are significant but emerging plans demonstrate the potential to tackle cost pressures and this, alongside, improvements in practice should improve the situation over time.

The Review Team highlighted the following key messages from their overall findings:

- Plans have the right building blocks but are over optimistic in relation to the time taken to realise the benefits – despite the service knowing itself well there is a need to address on-going poor performance, issues of pressure and managing demand and quality of practice. The lack of pace and focus requires immediate attention.
- Basic practice needs immediate attention - an urgent focus is required on supporting teams to focus on key practice standards
- Partners need to work together across the system – to achieve improvements requires a strong partnership approach.
- Financial pressures need determined and persistent action – the recent focus on the financial strategy needs corporate support and challenging but achievable goals with realistic timescales i.e. 2 to 3 years

The peer team suggested the following priorities:

- A 'back to basics' safeguarding improvement plan
- Resolving the future direction for the 'Front Door'
- Implementing a detailed financial recovery plan
- Reviewing and defining the role of Early Help

## **Suggestions for Improvement**

Following the peer review, and based on the evidence collected, the peer team provide some suggestions for the council to consider in the short to medium term as follows:

### **Safeguarding:**

- Consider reinstating/establishing an Improvement Board
- Refocus senior managers on key areas of performance e.g.:
  - compliance with Section 47 timescales
  - frequent management oversight
  - timely completion of assessments
- Engage whole workforce in the Improvement agenda

### **Front Door:**

- Realise the original vision and accelerate plans
- Integrate management arrangements
- Consider decision making, triage and feedback arrangements
- Review role of Initial Response and the proposed Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

### **Financial Recovery Plan:**

- Produce a 2-3 year costed Edge of Care strategy
- Clear and robust gatekeeping, decision making and accountability
  - Strategic oversight/ accountability
  - Consider budget holding
  - Streamline decision making/ meetings
- Progress plans for market development and brokerage
- Consider investment in workforce retention and progression

### **Early Help:**

- Review scope and strategy with full partner engagement
- Distinguish between Early Help service and strategy
- Consider targeting council investment at families with complex needs
- Consider opportunities for a shift from collaborative to integrated commissioning

In the shorter term there are some 'quick wins' that the council should consider:

- Secure emails required for social workers to enable effective communication with partners
- Bin the booklet – Police introduced a 'booklet' to be completed to request a strategy discussion as an attempt to solve historic issues. This is time

consuming and bureaucratic and results in the social worker not following 'Working Together' so has become a risk to safe practice.

- Speed up WSCB processes taking care to ensure effective and timely decision-making
- Build on and use the availability of good quality data
- Get feedback out to the workforce
- Schedule a Health and Wellbeing Board session on children and families

Following the team's presentation on 17<sup>th</sup> April, you then ran a prioritisation workshop with a wide variety of stakeholders, which the peer review team stayed for at your request to assist with the dialogue on tables. This has assisted in determining top priorities for the council and the multi-agency partners to focus upon in the short to medium term.

You and your colleagues will want to consider how you incorporate the team's findings into your improvement plans, including taking the opportunity for sector support through either your regional arrangements or the LGA's Principal Advisor West Midlands Region, Howard Davis who can be contacted by either email: [howard.davis@local.gov.uk](mailto:howard.davis@local.gov.uk) or by phone on 07920 061197 . In addition, your regional LGA Children's Improvement Adviser is Claire Burgess who can be contacted by either email: [claire.burgess23@gmail.com](mailto:claire.burgess23@gmail.com) or by phone on 07854 407337.

Once again, thank you for agreeing to receive a peer review and to all involved for their participation. In particular, please pass on our thanks to Lisa Peaty, John Fisher and David Price for their support in both the lead up to and during the on-site review week.

We wish you well with taking forward the issues identified by the peer review and on your continuing improvement journey. If you need any further clarification of any of the detail contained in this letter or further support please do not hesitate to contact me.



**Peter Rentell**  
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