

CABINET
24 SEPTEMBER 2015**WORCESTERSHIRE SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD**
ANNUAL REPORT 2014/15

Relevant Cabinet Member

Mr J P Champion

Relevant Officer

Director of Children's Services

Recommendation

- 1. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families recommends that Cabinet:**
 - (a) receives the 2014/15 WSCB Annual Report;**
 - (b) notes the progress of the work of the Board; and**
 - (c) requests that the 2014/15 WSCB Annual Report is presented to full Council in November 2015.**

Background

2. The Independent Chair of Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board is responsible for publishing an annual report that gives a public assessment of the effectiveness of child safeguarding and promotion of the welfare of children in Worcestershire, and both recognises its achievements and is realistic about the challenges that remain. The report is made publicly available through publication on the Board's website, and is also formally submitted to the Chief Executive and Leader of the County Council as the most senior strategic local leaders, to the Health and Well-Being Board, and to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel. It is sent to Worcestershire's Police and Crime Commissioner and to the Chair of the Health and Well-being Board.

3. 2014/15 saw continuing change amongst several agencies with downward pressure on resources. Despite this, safeguarding has remained a priority for member agencies and the Board has been able to focus on its priorities and to meet extra demands. Whilst the period covered by the report is 2014/15, some of the problem areas identified have progressed since then. One example is social work recruitment which has significantly improved with 85% of vacancies now filled. This was achieved by changing the strategy to recruiting newly qualified staff because of the national shortage of experienced social workers. The issue is now one of retention and the Council is working to establish a career pathway to retain good staff. Referrals to Children's Social Care have increased during the year, adding to

pressures on the system and some staff have high caseloads related to this and to the need to protect newly qualified staff.

4. Performance data indicated that some practice improved but some remained problematic, relating to several agencies, and by the end of the year questions were raised about the safety of the child protection system. Feedback from the recent Local Government Association (LGA) peer review confirmed these concerns and recommended four priorities for WCC:

- 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

5. The WCC Improvement Board is now overseeing the Back to Basics safeguarding improvement plan, and there is evidence of improved practice. Timeliness remains an issue and work is underway to identify contributory factors including the performance of other agencies, and the Board is focusing on developing collective responsibility for achieving good performance levels

6. Early Help has also been an area of concern and it has become clear that there is an over-reliance on commissioned services to meet needs and provide early interventions. A new Early Help Strategy is due to be finalised in November 2015 and the expectation is for universal services to collectively manage demand levels. At the present time, early help arrangements are not achieving this and evidence in 2014/15 indicated that there were long waiting times for available support, high threshold levels for some early help cases, confusion about what early help means for practitioners, and less communication between providers and universal services than was expected. As a result the Board was not able to assure itself of the effectiveness of early help and would expect to see better outcomes for children, evidence of collective responsibility for early help, and fewer referrals to the Access Centre before it felt more assured

7. Child Sexual Exploitation has been a particular focus for the Board in recent months, most notably the development of a victim support pathway. A strategy has now been agreed and whilst there is still a great deal of work to be done, the Board has been assured that in Worcestershire sexual exploitation exists on a relatively small and generally individualised scale. During the year there was little evidence of a link to gangs, organised crime or any specific minority ethnic group, and there is also no indication that disclosures or reporting concerns have been ignored.

Key Issues

8. The LGA Peer Review also identified two particular issues relating to the Board:

- 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
- All the appropriate plans are in place but the Board could do more to drive improvement. It should accelerate implementation of its plans and ensure swift decision making and challenge in areas such as early help.

9. The Board accepts these as areas for improvement and based on the evidence available during 2014/15, it is now working to three main strategic priorities which will take the issues forward:

- Robust Safeguarding Practice including improving core child protection work, implementing the CSE strategy, and increasing service user feedback/the voice of the child
- Effective Partnership Working including work on developing the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), and early help
- Effective Board Leadership including improving the pace, scrutiny and challenge roles, and implementing a new structure

10. Work is therefore underway on the key issues identified in the 2014/15 Annual Report through actions such as:

- developing policies and guidelines that establish practice standards for use by all practitioners, and providing training
- multi-agency auditing to check on the quality of front line practice
- obtaining performance data on agencies' practice, identifying any problem areas, and holding them to account for improving their performance where required
- identifying gaps in the system and any groups of vulnerable children that require particular attention eg missing children
- working together to develop new approaches to identified issues such as CSE, and managing demand through improving the Front Door service, implementing a MASH, and widening the concept of early help to encompass universal and commissioned services

Conclusion

11. The Board concluded at the end of 2014/15 that based on an improved body of evidence from data, audits, reports and learning, safeguarding arrangements are in place but it could not be assured of their effectiveness in respect of children in the child protection system. In order to be assured, the Board would need to see significant improvement in frontline basic practice, evidence that children's needs are met in a timely manner and that risk is being effectively managed. It is also clear that appropriate help needs to be offered to children and families at an earlier stage by a range of agencies in order to reduce the pressure of those requiring specific services in the social care system. Work continues on establishing the extent and nature of child sexual exploitation and on developing effective preventative measures. There continue to be multi-agency areas for improvement around consistent practice, communication/information sharing and 'Think Family'. However, overall there is a strong commitment by all Board member agencies to prioritise safeguarding.

Supporting Information

- Appendix 1 - [Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report 2014-15](#) Available electronically. A hard copy of the report will be made available at reception and in the Members' area at County Hall.

Contact Points

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director of Children's Services) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report.