

Cabinet

12 December 2018

Joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to domestic abuse in Durham – Improvement Action Plan



Ordinary Decision

Report of Corporate Management Team

Margaret Whellans, Corporate Director of Children & Young People's Services

Councillor Olwyn Gunn, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children & Young People

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide Cabinet with an update following the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of the multi agency response to children living with or experiencing domestic abuse in County Durham.
- 2 To present to Cabinet the JTAI Improvement Action Plan for approval.

Executive summary

- 3 Between 9 and 13 July 2018, four separate Inspectorates undertook a joint inspection of the multi-agency response to domestic abuse in Durham. The inspection team was made up of 15 inspectors from the following:
 - Ofsted
 - Care Quality Commission
 - HMI Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS)
 - HMI Probation

- 4 The inspection included a 'deep dive' focus on how all agencies worked together to respond to the needs of children of all ages living with and experiencing domestic abuse.
- 5 Key findings from the inspection are contained within a letter which was provided to all key partners (**Appendix 2**) and includes a number of strengths, one area for priority action and a number of areas for improvement.
- 6 The Corporate Director of Children's Services is the lead officer and is required to work with Chief Officers of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) to provide a response to the joint inspectorate with a written statement of proposed actions to the findings.

Recommendation(s)

- 7 Cabinet is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the information contained within this report;
 - (b) Approve the JTAI Improvement Action Plan;
 - (c) Approve the proposed governance arrangements.

Background

- 8 During the inspection, inspectors spent time in our front of house First Contact and MASH, they met with senior and middle managers from across the partnership, with front-line practitioners across all agencies and they also spoke to children and families. They inspected a large number of case files of children who had experienced domestic abuse, 7 of these were in-depth "deep dive".
- 9 Inspectors acknowledged the challenging nature of the multi-agency inspection and the complexities that exist for agencies working with families experiencing domestic abuse, where there is often more than one victim and risk assessment and decision making is often complex because domestic abuse is not the only risk factor and also because the impact upon children of domestic abuse is not always immediately apparent.
- 10 The JTAI process does not provide an overall "grade". These inspections identify multi agency strengths in practice and areas for improvement. The findings are summarised in paragraphs 11 to 14 below.

Areas of Strength:

- 11 The report identifies 29 areas of strength in relation to practice across the partnership. These can be summarised as follows:

- Strong strategic intent and commitment by all partners, together with investment and a commitment to commissioning services for adult and child victims of domestic abuse;
- The Council is prioritising Children’s Services through increased resources and capacity in the frontline and at senior management level and through the commission of an electronic system. There is investment in a new model of social work practice - Signs of Safety - and actions to improve the recruitment and retention of social workers were being delivered. This is laying the foundation to create an environment in which social work practice can flourish;
- Some of the direct practice with children and families that was observed and audited was identified as good and parents that were spoken to spoke highly of the support they had received, particularly from their social worker;
- Inspectors identified some positive examples of Operation Encompass, whereby schools receive notifications the day following a domestic abuse incident and Police call-out; this meant they were able to provide swift emotional support to children;
- Police responded swiftly to high risk cases of domestic abuse;
- Through training and development, health had ensured domestic abuse was a safeguarding priority for GP practices; they identified good joint working across health services and trusts;
- Across the criminal justice agencies – National Probation Service (NPS), Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) and the Youth Offending Service (YOS) there was a good strategic understanding of the impact of domestic abuse on children and targeted services and programmes were in place for perpetrators.
- The range of services and interventions for victims provided by the YOS was highlighted as a strength, in particular their “Clear Cut Communication” programme which supports young people who may have learning difficulties to express themselves clearly, reducing the need for expressive violence.

Priority Action:

- 12 Inspectors identified one area for Priority Action and required the partnership to act swiftly to improve the functioning of Strategy Meetings. Strategy Meetings are held when risk of significant harm to children is considered to be high. Strategy Meetings bring key partners together swiftly and usually within 24 hours. Key partners are set out within Working Together 2018 and include Children’s Social Care, Police, Health and other relevant agencies such as schools and/or nursery providers.

- 13 Inspectors identified that when the threshold for a Strategy Meeting is reached, there was significant variation in how long it took for the meetings to be convened. They were critical of agencies with key information either failing to attend Strategy Meetings or to provide relevant information to inform the meeting and to enable an effective risk assessment to take place. Records of the key actions and agreements of the meeting were not always shared.

Areas for Improvement:

- 14 There were 42 areas for improvement identified following the inspection which are set out within the letter. For the purposes of developing a coherent action plan, these 42 areas, together with the Priority Action, have been grouped into 5 multi-agency improvement areas as follows:-

1. Priority Action – Strategy Meetings

See paragraphs 12 and 13 above.

2. Front Door – First Contact/Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

A number of improvement actions related to the operation of the Front Door, in particular the MASH. Inspectors identified:-

- The MASH is under-resourced to be able to respond effectively to the volume of referrals coming through the front door, and this sometimes led to delays in progressing referrals;
- Governance arrangements need to be strengthened so that there is strategic level multi-agency oversight and challenge;
- Decision making regarding next steps following analysis of risk and multi-agency information sharing was felt to be insufficiently robust as it was not carried out jointly with other agencies;
- A range of issues relating to sharing of information were identified impacted by some agencies – in particular the criminal justice agencies (NPS, CRC, YOS) – not being represented and also that knowledge of the distinct roles of each of these was not well understood leading to missed opportunities to gather and utilise information known; Inspectors were also concerned that partner agencies do not always receive information about decisions taken in relation to referrals;
- Whilst some strengths of Operation Encompass were identified (see paragraph 11 above) there were areas for development identified particularly in relation to the speed with which notifications are provided to schools following medium or low risk domestic abuse incidents;
- Inconsistent application of thresholds meant that some cases that were considered high risk by Inspectors were graded low.;

- Safeguarding practice within some of the health services were identified as being under-developed.

3. Multi-Agency Safeguarding Practice & Workforce Development

A number of the areas for improvement pertained directly to the requirement to strengthen the way practitioners and agencies were working together to deliver an effective and robust safeguarding function for children across the partnership:-

- The use of chronologies and consideration of cumulative risk of domestic abuse and its impact upon children, was considered to be insufficiently robust and this led to over-optimism on behalf of agencies in relation to future risk and lack of professional challenge;
- Delays were identified in police attending incidents and in Children's Social Care progressing referrals;
- The quality of assessments and plans need to be more consistently good leading to improved decision making, risk management and interventions to improve outcomes for children;
- Multi-Agency challenge needs to be more evident where there are disagreements regarding decision making and next steps for children and families;
- Over-reliance on adult victims of domestic abuse to keep their children safe. Use of written agreements need to be more balanced and focus on actions required of perpetrators to change behaviour;
- Think Family requires further embedding, particularly across health services.

4. Leadership and Management

The key areas of improvement that have been captured within this section include:-

- The need to improve the quality of auditing and monitoring of frontline practice, both at a single- and multi-agency level;
- Management oversight of safeguarding caseloads in health services requires development;
- Actions identified to address issues in Children's Social Care such as recruitment and retention of social workers and the implementation of the new IT system leading to manageable caseloads for practitioners and to reduce changes in social workers for families need to begin to evidence impact in the practice at the frontline;
- Challenge and scrutiny from the LSCB needs to be strengthened so that partners are consistently held to account.

5. Voice of the Child

Ensuring the voice of the child informs practice and decision making is key for all agencies; their views, wishes and experiences should “leap out of the page” of every assessment, plan and record of involvement. Inspectors found that:-

- Children’s voices were rarely recorded in cases of domestic abuse and their views not taken into account when assessing vulnerability and risk;
- The needs of unborn children are not considered at a sufficiently early stage.

JTAI Improvement Action Plan:

- 15 Since the conclusion of the inspection, and in response to the letter provided by the Inspectorate (**Appendix 2**), work has been ongoing with partners to develop a multi-agency JTAI Improvement Action Plan (**Appendix 3**).
- 16 The plan sets out the detailed actions partners will take to address the inspection findings and groups these within 5 themed areas for improvement, which are:-
 - Priority Action – Strategy Meetings
 - Front Door & Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub
 - Safeguarding Practice & Workforce Development
 - Leadership & Management
 - Voice of the Child
- 17 All actions within the Plan are assigned to either an individual agency or to a partnership group. The plan includes a description of the expected impact of each action and sets out a programme of scrutiny and audit to assure partners that the required impact has been achieved.
- 18 All actions have a timescale of either 3 months (December 2018); 6 months (March 2019); 9 months (June 2019) or one year (September 2019).

Governance:

- 19 There is clear ownership of this plan within the LSCB Executive Group. The leads for each of the actions will be required to provide quarterly reports on progress to the LSCB Executive, together with evidence that the identified actions have taken place within the timescales set out. Quarterly reports will provide evidence that the monitoring and/or scrutiny activity has taken place. Such activity will be required to demonstrate the desired impact has been achieved, and progress is

being made. Actions will be reviewed where this is not the case and revised where necessary.

- 20 The LSCB Executive Group will provide oversight and multi-agency challenge for the delivery of all required actions. This will ensure accountability for the delivery of required improvement in safeguarding practice is held at a senior executive level across the partnership.
- 21 It is the intention of the LSCB Executive Group to commission an independent audit of practice against the JTAI Improvement Action Plan during the period October to December 2019 – one year post-JTAI. This will provide assurance to the partnership that multi-agency safeguarding practice has improved and is robust in County Durham and that the identified actions have achieved the desired impact on outcomes for children and families.

Conclusion

- 22 This report summarises the outcomes of the JTAI Inspection into the multi-agency response to domestic abuse in Durham.
- 23 All partners worked closely together both during and after the Inspection to address the key findings and to develop a comprehensive action plan designed to robustly address all areas of improvement identified by the joint inspectorate.
- 24 The strategic governance of the JTAI Improvement Action Plan and the commitment of all partners to provide scrutiny and challenge provides assurance of a robust focus on ensuring good progress is made and children and families are supported to achieve good outcomes.

Background papers: None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The Joint Inspection was carried out under Section 20 of the Children Act 2004. The Local Authority, as the Lead Agency, is required to provide a written response to the findings.

Finance

Actions to address capacity issues identified by inspectors will be required, wherever possible, to be delivered within existing resource

Consultation

None.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

An equality impact screening assessment has been carried out to ensure compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty (**Appendix 4**).

Human Rights

None.

Crime and Disorder

The criminal justice agencies, including Police, NPS, CRC and YOS, to take required actions to work in partnership to address and tackle the impact of domestic abuse upon children.

Staffing

The JTAI letter identifies the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) is under-resourced to deal with the volume of referrals received. The action in response is that a review of the MASH will be carried out. The review may have staffing implications depending upon the outcome and any actions to address capacity and volume. These will be issues for the partnership to address collectively.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

There is a risk that the actions identified do not deliver the required improvement in safeguarding practice and outcomes for children and families do not improve. The LSCB Executive Group will receive quarterly reports on progress from all partners contributing to the plan and remedial action will be identified and taken where actions are not delivering the required impact.

Procurement

A procurement process may be required to facilitate independent scrutiny and overview of the delivery of the JTAI Improvement Action Plan and provide assurance that the required impact has been achieved.