

Children & Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee

16 January 2017



Role of the Social Worker - Overview

Joint Report of Lorraine O'Donnell, Director of Transformation and Partnerships and Margaret Whellans, Interim Corporate Director - Children & Young People's Services

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to raise awareness and understanding among members of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny committee of the role of the social worker in Durham County Council.
- 2 Mark Gurney Strategic Manager for Child Protection and Disability and Principal Social Worker will present a power point presentation to members of the committee which will include the range of work covered by Children's Services Social Workers.

Background and Legislation

- 3 The fundamental purpose of children's social care is to make sure that the most vulnerable children can have a safe and dependable foundation from which to grow and flourish.
- 4 Children's Services in County Durham have the lead responsibility for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children with a key aim to provide early help for children and families and protection for those that need it.
- 5 Services are delivered under legislative frameworks and associated guidance; the primary legislation is the Children Act 1989 but it is estimated that since 1987 there have been 98 separate acts of parliament and over 400 different sets of associated statutory guidance and initiatives that directly impact on children and young people. Other critical pieces of legislation and guidance include the Adoption and Children Act 2002, Children Act 2004, Care Leavers Act 2002, Children and Families Act 2014 and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2013.
- 6 In England social work is a degree level profession and social workers must also be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council, which set standards of conduct and proficiency.
- 7 As in all other Local Authorities which have statutory responsibilities to deliver children's services, children's social work in County Durham is performed within a highly regulated and statutorily organised environment.
- 8 This statutory framework sets the parameters around many aspects of social work activity – for example maximum timescales for undertaking an assessment,

visiting frequencies to children who are looked after, the role of the social worker as the key worker for children on a child protection plan and lead assessor for children who are defined as children in need under the Children Act 1989.

- 9 Members will be aware that there is an accompanying performance management framework that enables a detailed understanding of the activity of social workers and their teams. Managers receive a monthly team profile with 49 indicators of team performance, ranging from completion of assessments within timescales, child protection conferences occurring within 15 days of a strategy meeting along with HR data such as vacancies, supervisions and appraisals.
- 10 Local Authorities are required to submit data returns on their performance to the DfE and this is aggregated into annual reports with an emphasis on safeguarding children and children who are looked after or adopted. Measures that are included are: types of placement of looked after children, placement stability, and educational attainment.
- 11 The nationally collected data supports the availability of data for the purposes of accountability and transparency at national and local level, and provides benchmarks of national performance against which performance can be judged locally. It is collected through a range of statutory data collection exercises including the children in need census which is a large scale data collection exercise that is submitted in the May of each year.
- 12 Local Authority Children and Family Social Work functions are inspected and regulated by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Ofsted is a non-ministerial department of Government.
- 13 Local Authorities are also expected to designate a Principal Child and Family Social Worker. This role was created following the recommendations of the Munro Review of Child Protection in 2011. The person holding the role is expected to be a senior manager who has lead responsibility for practice and can report the views of front-line practitioners to all levels of management including the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services, Chief Executive and Council Leaders. At a national level the Principal Social Worker Network is valued as a source of valuable professional insight by the DfE and Chief Social Worker. In Durham County Council the post is held by Mark Gurney, Strategic Manager Child Protection and Disability.

Service Structure

- 14 Child and Family Social Work workforce in County Durham is delivered via a number of teams. These are as follows:
 - **First Contact:** this is a social work led service which receives and processes all requests and referrals for assessment to Children's Social Care. The team is co-located with colleagues from the police and NHS so that all safeguarding referrals are triaged through a multi-agency safeguarding hub (often referred to as MASH).

- **11 Families First Teams:** offering assessment and intervention to children in need and their families, including carrying out child protection inquiries, supporting children on a child protection plan and reducing risk of significant harm or the need to become looked after by the Local Authority.
- **3 Child Protection/Court Work Teams:** managing cases where there may be a need to offer a family one final chance before issuing care proceedings and also those cases where the risk is so great that the Local Authority has put the matter before the Court.
- **2 0-13 and 14-25 Children with a Disability/Transitions Teams:** these teams carry the cases of the children with the most complex disabilities and/or life-limiting illnesses. The Transitions Team works to ensure a smooth transition for those young people who will require services as young adults from Adult Services.
- **3 Looked After/Permanence Teams:** there are 3 teams in the Looked After Service that support children and young people who are in permanent and long term looked after placements such as foster care or residential care. The Permanence 3 Team specialises in preparing reports to support the decision to place children for adoption and also works with colleagues in the Adoption Service to find and match suitable families for these children.
- **2 Young People's Service Teams:** these 2 teams support care leavers (in some cases up to the age of 25) as well as vulnerable young people aged 16-18 including unaccompanied asylum seekers and young people who may be vulnerable to homelessness.
- **3 Fostering Teams and 1 Adoption Team:** these teams recruit, assess and support foster carers and adopters as well as providing post-adoption "post-box" contact arrangements for parents whose children have been adopted.
- **Full Circle Service:** this team provides therapeutic support to children who have experienced traumatic life experiences and/or have attachment issues. The team supports children and their foster carers or adopters where they may be associated attachment or emotional/behavioural issues.
- **Youth offending Service:** as part of the multi-agency service, several social workers are employed within the Youth Offending Service.
- In addition to the above, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) who have a statutory responsibility to oversee care planning for looked after children (and in Durham also act as independent chairs of child protection conferences) must be qualified social workers. There are also regulatory requirements for managers of children's homes to hold designated qualifications, of which a social work qualification is one example.
- Excluding managers and independent reviewing officers, 245 social worker employees within Durham County Council renewed their HCPC registration at the end of November 2016.

Casework Examples

- 15 At the time of writing this report there are 3,732 active cases across the Service. 773 of these cases are children who are looked after by the Local Authority, 434 are children who are on a child protection plan and 362 are young people who are 16+ including care leavers. The remaining 2163 cases are children in need age 0 – 16 across the County.
- 16 Durham County Council has issued 165 sets of care proceedings in the last 12 months involving over 200 children.
- 17 On a typical day therefore the type of work that will be carried out by children and family social workers in County Durham could include:
 - Undertaking an assessment of children in a family where there have been a number of domestic abuse referrals to the police; this would include support to the mother as a victim of abuse, encouraging her male partner to accept responsibility for his violence and seek support from a perpetrator group and working with the children to understand and address the impact on their emotional and psychological well-being of witnessing domestic abuse.
 - Working with a mother with mental health issues to identify who in her extended family may look after her child if she attends as a voluntary patient at hospital and working with the child to understand what is happening because their mother is unwell.
 - Attending a team around the family meeting with the parents of a child with significant physical and learning disabilities to ensure that the care package meets the child's needs and also supports the parents as the child's carers.
 - Attending a meeting with parents and their solicitor at a meeting before proceedings, also attended by the Local Authority's solicitor. This might be a case where a protection plan to address concerns about neglect (household cleanliness, children's personal hygiene and attendance at medical appointments and school for the children) is not working well and the meeting would issue a letter before proceedings – effectively giving the parents one final opportunity to change before care proceedings are issued.
 - Giving evidence and being cross examined in Court at a contested hearing where the Local Authority's care plan of permanent removal of the children from the care of their parents has been challenged by the parents.
 - Visiting two children who are placed in permanent care with family members who have been approved as foster carers; the family resides in West London and the children attend local schools and health services and the Local Authority needs to ensure through regular visiting that the placement is meeting their long term needs and the children feel safe and supported.

- Working with a vulnerable 17 year old who has been at risk of homelessness and whose current accommodation is becoming problematic due to her behaviour.
- Visiting prospective adopters to discuss the potential placement of a child who has been approved for adoption is awaiting a suitable match for a permanence adoptive family.

Current Pressures

- 18 In common with other Children's Services Local Authorities Durham County council faces a number of pressures to delivering its children's social work services.
- 19 The number of current vacancies across the service is 23. Vacancies are covered by the use of agency staff and there is an active recruitment and retention programme chaired by Carole Payne, Head of Children's Services.
- 20 The main recruitment issue is with suitably qualified and experienced staff; we can recruit and train newly qualified workers and currently have 30 across the service. Newly qualified workers require an assessed and supported year in practice and we are able to support them in teams or through the Social Work Academy (a time-limited funded opportunity for a more bespoke model of support in the 1st year post qualification). However it is acknowledged that by virtue of their limited experience and knowledge, they are not well placed to take on the most complex and challenging work.
- 21 Members will be aware that following the Ofsted Inspection in March 2016 there are key challenges to ensure consistent quality of service delivery. This is being managed through the Quality Improvement Programme overseen by the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services.
- 22 Issues have also arisen about high caseloads in some parts of the service. High caseloads have a significant impact on the capacity of practitioners to deliver high quality work. We aim to achieve a caseload of 20 cases per worker across the service for full time experienced workers and 10-15 for newly qualified practitioners. At the time of writing, caseloads in the service average 22.
- 23 Whilst the total number of cases across the service has remained broadly the same for the past 12 months (approx. 3500 at any one time), at the same time the service has seen an escalation in numbers of children on a child protection plan and looked after children. The number of child on a CP plan has grown from 348 on 31/12/2015 to 434 to date (increase of 86). The number of children looked after has grown from 665 to 773, an increase of 108.
- 24 Escalation in the number of such cases means that the service faces additional pressures in terms of case complexity and challenge. These numbers also are reflected in the increase in numbers of care proceedings referred to in paragraph 14 above.
- 25 Increased case complexity alongside the need to ensure a suitably qualified and experienced workforce are able to continue to deliver a high quality service to

the most vulnerable children and families in the County are the key challenges facing the service at present.

Conclusion

- 26 This report has provided Members with an overview of the range and complexity of child and family social work in County Durham. The legislative framework and the associated statutory guidance that underpin the Local Authority's responsibilities are outlined.
- 27 The pressures on Durham County Council to continue to meet its statutory responsibilities to children in need and children looked after are also summarised as are the actions currently being taken to address these pressures.

Recommendations

- 28 Members of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee are requested to:
- i. Note the content of the presentation
 - ii. Comment accordingly on the presentation
 - iii. Indicate if more information is required from the service.

Background Papers

None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance – None

Staffing - None

Risk – The report outlines the statutory and regulatory background to the provision of children’s social work services. A key part of this work is to ensure that the welfare of children and young people across the County is actively promoted and that they are safeguarded from risk of significant harm.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty – None

Accommodation - None

Crime and Disorder – None

Human Rights - None

Consultation – None

Procurement - None

Disability Issues – None

Legal Implications – The report highlights the legal framework that underpins the delivery of statutory social work services to children and families in the Council