



**Children and Young People's Overview  
and Scrutiny Committee**

**Role of the Social Worker from a Child's  
Perspective Review**

**September 2018**

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## **Chair's Foreword**



We all want the best for our children but unfortunately, sometimes circumstances overtake our lives and we need help or intervention from social care to help us get back on track. We recognise that the expertise and skills of our social workers is critical in delivering support to our children and families.

The impact of austerity often increases the workload of social care and the demand for social workers rises. Therefore, it is important we do our utmost to retain our social workers and attract the very best social workers to join us at Durham County Council.

At its meeting in July 2017, Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny committee agreed to carry out review activity looking at the role of the social worker from a child's perspective.

The committee wanted to increase awareness of the role of the social worker and wanted to find out from children on the edge of care who had contact with social care their views and opinions on their relationship with their social worker.

Following the Ofsted judgement on Durham County Council's Children's Services in 2016, a lot of work has been undertaken to improve the service provided to children and their families.

The working group recognise the complex role of the social worker and in doing so recognise the importance of stability and continuity for children in what can be a confusing and harrowing time for them.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in the review, members of the working group, officers from Children and Young People's Service, partners from Investing in Children, and children and young people who provided us with their view and opinions of their experience of the service.

**Councillor Christine Potts**

**Chair of Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

## Executive Summary

- 1 At its meeting on 4 July 2017 the children and young people's overview and scrutiny committee agreed to undertake review activity looking at the role of the social worker from a child's perspective.
- 2 The focus of the review was to look at how children are referred into children's social services, the assessment process and the training and development of social workers. In looking at these areas, the review group held focus groups with newly qualified social workers (NQSWs), experienced social workers and young people who had experience of our services. The terms of reference and meeting schedule can be found at appendices 1 and 2.
- 3 Social work requires professional registration through a national body following degree level qualification. Durham County Council has taken the opportunity to 'grow its own' social workers with the development of an academy that provides protected caseloads and significant support to NQSWs. Focus group sessions held with NQSWs identified that those NQSWs taking the academy route felt much more supported than NQSWs outside of the academy.
- 4 Evidence indicates that the Social Work Academy made excellent progress in its first year and had increased its cohort. The success of the academy is crucial to the Council addressing social worker recruitment in the long-term and therefore the review group is interested to monitor its progress.
- 5 Durham County Council (DCC) social workers were recognised for the work they do in a celebration event held on World Social Work Day in March 2018 and the review group were delighted to learn that this is to become an annual event to recognise the skill and dedication of our social workers. Evidence indicates that whilst social workers have access to support from supervisors and counselling services that are available to all council employees there is not a bespoke mental health and emotional wellbeing service for social care employees. Establishment and promotion of a mental health and emotional wellbeing service together with support from team leaders and managers to access these services would provide social care staff with additional support when dealing with particularly distressing cases.
- 6 During the review, information was received relating to a number of service improvements that had taken place just prior to the commencement of the review or were imminent. Evidence suggests that the introduction of electronic referrals from partner agencies will speed up the referral process and cut down on the time taken to input information. The service is replacing its current computer system to a much more up to date and efficient system, the new system is expected to go live in January 2019.
- 7 A restructure of Early Help, Assessment and Safeguarding Services took place in February 2018 that will improve stability and consistency for children

in the children's social care system through the establishment of 14 Families First Teams that will take a case from allocation to case conclusion, thus reducing the number of social workers involved with the child and family. The restructure has also introduced two additional teams, the pre-birth team and edge of care team, to work with specific groups of children and young people. Evidence suggests that the impact of these new teams will reduce the number of children taken into local authority care. The new teams should be evaluated to establish their impact.

- 8 An important aspect of the review was the views of children and young people who were on the edge of care and had experience of the social care system. Young people took part in an evidence gathering session where it was highlighted that some young people had many social workers that led to them repeating their story many times, and to a point of becoming disengaged with the service; they had experienced poor communication from their social worker regarding appointment changes. This was in contrast to the views of other young people who had developed a good relationship with their only social worker. However, there were still communication issues at times.
- 9 Young people said there were problems with communications in relation to arranging and cancelling appointments, and added their preferred method of communication was via a telephone call.
- 10 The Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) is a central point for screening, gathering, sharing and analysing information about children who may be at risk of harm or who may need support services. Professionals are co-located from partner agencies to access their own systems and there are virtual links with other key agencies and will be requested to provide information when necessary. The review group took the opportunity to visit the MASH to see how incoming calls and referrals are analysed.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation One:** The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services continues to monitor via performance information the number of case files of social workers to ensure consistency and stability for County Durham children in contact with Early Help, Assessment and Safeguarding services.

**Recommendation Two:** The Director of Children and Young People's Services carries out an evaluation of the new edge of care services and pre-birth services following twelve months in operation to highlight their impact on children, young people and families and on the numbers of children entering into the looked after system.

**Recommendation Three:** That all members of Durham County Council as corporate parents visit the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub at least once during their term of office and that as all members are corporate parents the Corporate Director of Resources give consideration to mandatory Corporate Parenting Training for all members of the Council.

**Recommendation Four:** Durham County Council's Social Worker Academy has made excellent progress within its first year and Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee is keen to monitor its development and asks that arrangements be made for regular report to be presented to them with information on progress and achievements.

**Recommendation Five:** The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services together with the Director of Public Health consider the establishment and promotion of mental health and emotional wellbeing services for children's social care staff and for supervision to monitor staff dealing with highly emotional/sensitive cases.

**Recommendation Six:** The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services with assistance from children and young people, who have experience of children's social care, explore the development of a welcome pack. That would help children and young people first coming into contact with children's social care services with what to expect and to include information that will help them to understand their situation.

**Recommendation Seven:** The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services establish a communication protocol between social workers and children and young people in their care that will set out a procedure that will ensure continuity between social workers.

## Background

- 11 In 2016, Durham County Council's Children's Services were judged as Requires Improvement by Ofsted. The Children and Young People's Service (CYPS) established a quality improvement board and associated improvement plan to address Ofsted's recommendations.
- 12 Highlighted in Ofsted's recommendations 'was a need for greater political oversight of front line practice'. With this in mind, Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CYPOSC) received a presentation on the role of the social worker. Following this presentation, members of the committee suggested this as a topic for a review activity but they wanted to look at it from a child's perspective and involve young people in the review.
- 13 At its meeting on 4 July 2017, members of CYPOSC agreed to carry out a review of the role of the social worker from a child's perspective. At its meeting on 21 November 2017, the committee agreed the terms of reference for the review, attached at appendix 1.
- 14 Evidence was gathered using desk research, a visit to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub and from witnesses attending meetings. A schedule of the meetings is attached at appendix 2.

## Service Improvement

### Key Findings

**Electronic referral forms have speeded up the referral process.**

**A new IT system will be rolled out that will reduce duplication and make it easier for referrals to be tracked.**

**A robust quality assurance programme is still being implemented.**

**An aspiration for a case file limit of 20 or under is in place.**

**The Restructure of the service to 14 Families First teams will give more stability to the child allowing a social worker to stay with more children to case conclusion.**

**A new edge of care and pre-birth team is established, and impact needs to be evaluated.**

- 15 The Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub is a central point for the screening, gathering, sharing and analysing of information about children who may be at risk of harm or who may need support services. The Service is made up of a range of professionals from different agencies who are all co-located. Approximately 2000 referrals a month are received expressing concern for children from families, agencies and members of the public. Until recently, referrals from professionals were received via emails or hand written referral

forms, sometimes the information was incomplete or given in an unstructured manner which lengthened the time taken to process.

- 16 The introduction of an electronic referral form in November 2017 has speeded up the referral process providing the information in an ordered manner. The take up of the electronic referral forms was 95% in the first four weeks following its introduction and as at June 2018, less than 1% of referrals are not on the new Children's Services electronic referral form.
- 17 The current social care IT database system has been in operation in excess of twenty years and is no longer fit for purpose. A new database system Liquid Logic will replace the old system and is expected to go live in early 2019. The new system will reduce duplication of effort, be much more user friendly and quicker than the old system. The design of the new system is under pinned by business process reviews following a 'lean' methodology which aims to improve efficiency of systems.
- 18 Quality assurance activities includes:- several audit processes that include an element of moderation to ensure consistency of judgement is applied across the auditing programme and that the standard for good casework is clearly set and evaluated. The revised audit programme will bring a culture of quality where only good is good enough. Performance information indicates that at quarter 4 2016/17 50% of cases audited were good or above and at quarter 4 2017/2018 this had increased to 55%, so significant improvement is required. Progress is monitored quarterly via scrutiny.
- 19 The service aspires for caseload levels to be 20 or less and this will support quality of practice. Performance information suggests that in March 2018 44% of social workers in children's social care had caseloads below 20 compared to 37% in March 2017.
- 20 In February 2018, Early Help, Assessment and Safeguarding service went through a restructure that moved children's social care services from 11 locally based families first teams and three child protection teams to 14 locality based integrated Families First teams split across 4 localities. In addition, three specialist teams focussed on supporting children on the edge of care, disabled children and pre-birth are in place and work with families on a countywide basis. The First Contact and Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) is also part of the restructured Families First service.
- 21 Prior to the establishment of the edge of care team the service had faced a number of challenges where there was a family breakdown that required a young person needing to become looked after. The number of looked after children has significantly increased and this has been particularly the case for older young people and there was a need for more targeted intervention and support to families that results in fewer of these young people being looked after. The new pre-birth team is now in place and is providing support to ensure that unborn children are adequately safeguarded and families receive high levels of intensive support.

22 The new edge of care team provides a rapid response and if required overnight provision for children and families in crisis, enabling them to address and overcome difficulties that led to the family breakdown and prevent further escalation.

## Conclusions

23 All of the service improvements mentioned above lead to greater stability and consistency for the child. From speeding up the referral process with the use of an electronic referral form, by ensuring a robust quality assurance programme and aspiring to a social worker caseload of twenty all provides support and stability for the child. The pending introduction of the new IT database system will provide a system appropriate for the needs of its users.

24 The introduction of fourteen Families First teams that will enable social worker to stay with more children until their case conclusion will provide stability and consistency and allow trust to be built up between social worker and child/young person. The establishment of edge of care and pre-birth teams are intended to provide intensive support to families to help them remain together with the right support and prevent more children from entering the looked after system. However, it is important that these service improvements be evaluated to establish their impact.

25 The Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub is a model which relies on good partnership working to screen and analyse the information it receives, but again effectiveness needs careful and consistent monitoring.

**Recommendation One:** The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services continues to monitor via performance information the number of case files of social workers to ensure consistency and stability for County Durham children in contact with Early Help, Assessment and Safeguarding services.

**Recommendation Two:** The Director of Children and Young People's Services carries out an evaluation of the new edge of care services and pre-birth services following twelve months in operation to highlight their impact on children, young people and families and on the numbers of children entering into the looked after system.

**Recommendation Three:** That all members of Durham County Council as corporate parents visit the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub at least once during their term of office and that as all members are corporate parents the Corporate Director of Resources give consideration to mandatory Corporate Parenting Training for all members of the Council.

## Training and Development

### Key Findings

**Recruiting and retaining experienced front line social workers is a significant challenge.**

**Routes into social work are varied and not all via university.**

**Durham County Council's social worker academy continues to grow our own social workers.**

**Newly qualified social workers from the academy feel supported compared to those newly qualified social workers who have not gone via that route.**

**Experienced social workers have good relationships with their managers and are given opportunities to progress.**

**Effective support for the mental health and emotional wellbeing support to social workers is vital given the challenging the nature of their work.**

- 26 The service has faced challenges in the recruitment and retention of experienced social workers in some front line teams. However, this is not the case across the whole service and the same recruitment issues are not evident within the Looked After & Permanence Service. CYPS has put in place a recruitment and retention programme through the – 'Raising the Bar Group', to address these issues.
- 27 The traditional route into a social work profession is via a university degree. DCC works with five northeast universities and offers work placement opportunities to students on social work programmes.
- 28 Fast-track routes into social work via government supported programmes such as Step Up to Social Work and Frontline are also offered by DCC. Both of these programmes are aimed at graduates with degrees in subjects other than social work. A new apprenticeship route into social work has also been developed by CYPS, and this provides a career opportunity for talented and experienced support staff to step into social work, and use our apprenticeship levy to fund an otherwise expensive degree qualification. It is expected that four staff members will take up the opportunity from October 2019.
- 29 In 2016, DCC piloted the Social Work Academy. The initiative was designed to increase the availability of good quality, experienced social workers. In the first year there were 127 applications received for the 12 newly qualified social worker posts. A further 21 NQSWs were employed outside of the academy to

fill vacant posts. Evidence suggests that NQSWs who take the academy route receive more support compared to NQSWs who do not. From March 2018, there were 33 NQSWs. Now all NSQSWs are now treated as academy members.

- 30 Implementation of initiatives to support retention of NQSWs include a celebrations event for NQSWs who have completed their Assisted and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and a salary increment of approximately £800 to recognise this significant achievement.
- 31 The Health Care Professionals Council (HCPC) require social workers to be registered with them in order to practice and a part of maintaining registration is meeting standards of continued professional development. Evidence indicates there is a comprehensive programme of learning and development opportunities for social workers and their managers within the service.
- 32 Nationally the rate of work related stress and burnout among social workers is high compared to similar professions. The estimated average length of career of a social worker is 8 years, much less than the 15 years for similar demanding professions such as nurses. Therefore, mental health and emotional wellbeing support for social workers should be of as high importance level as training and development.
- 33 World Social Work Day in March 2018 saw DCC celebrate the work of all of its social workers. It is important for events such as this to continue to give the appreciation and recognition to social workers for their continued hard work.

## Conclusions

- 34 The NQSW academy has allowed DCC to 'grow its own' social workers and has increased its intake annually. Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny committee is impressed with the performance of the academy and is eager to monitor its performance and continued development.
- 35 Evidence indicates there is a wide variety of training and development programmes available to social workers that will assist them to demonstrate their continual professional development that is required by HCPC.
- 36 Evidence suggests 'burnout' among social workers is more likely after working in the profession for eight years. The mental health and emotional wellbeing of social workers is as equally as important as training and development.

**Recommendation Four:** Durham County Council's Social Worker Academy has made excellent progress within its first year and Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee is keen to monitor its development and asks that arrangements be made for regular report to be presented to them with information on progress and achievements.

**Recommendation Five:** The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services together with the Director of Public Health consider the establishment and promotion of mental health and emotional wellbeing services for children's social care staff and for supervision to monitor staff dealing with highly emotional/sensitive cases.

## What Children and Young People Say...?

### Key Findings

**Young people had varying experiences of their social workers; one young person had 12 changes in two years and another two had seven social workers in 18 months.**

**Young people suggested a welcome pack to include information on complaints and complements, contact details, relevant community and voluntary organisations and groups young people might want to join.**

**Young people want to be contacted by telephone and have information communicated to them in a timely manner.**

**Young people want a non-emergency contact number for weekends.**

- 37 A focus group of young people who had experience of being on the edge of care highlighted conflicting views of their experiences with the social care system.
- 38 Some young people told of having many social workers over the period of their involvement with the service such as in one young person's case, who had twelve social workers over a two-year period. This creates problems with consistency and continuity as each time she had a new social worker she had to go over the same details. A similar case example was highlighted of two sisters who had seven social workers over an eighteen-month period. However, since going into local authority care they have had the same social worker and their experience is extremely positive.
- 39 Alternatively, another example from a young person gave a contrasting view of having had only one social worker and having a good relationship with the social worker, and engaged with them over a long period of time and highly valued the support.
- 40 Young people suggested that a welcome pack that included contact information, relevant community and voluntary organisations, information on groups young people could join and short evaluation of how their first experience with their social worker went. The service could use the information from the evaluation for training purposes.

- 41 Evidence indicates that appointments with social workers were cancelled at short notice and on some occasions, the social worker cancelled without notifying the young person. Evidence suggests that young people would like social workers to contact them directly by telephone especially when arranging or rearranging appointments.
- 42 Young people were frustrated that at weekends their only contact number was that of the Emergency Duty Team. They suggested that an alternative number should be provided where young people could call for advice in non-emergency cases.

## Conclusions

- 43 Stability and consistency of their social worker is very important to children and young people when their lives are being turned upside down in other ways. There will be times when for whatever reason a different social worker needs to take over a case and in such situations the social worker should take the time to familiarise themselves with the young person's case.
- 44 Communications between children and their social worker are important for the relationship to work and trust to be built. Children and young people should be asked how they want their social worker to communicate with them and out of courtesy; if appointments are cancelled this information is communicated to them as soon as possible.

**Recommendation Six:** The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services with assistance from children and young people, who have experience of children's social care, explore the development of a welcome pack. That would help children and young people first coming into contact with children's social care services with what to expect and to include information that will help them to understand their situation.

**Recommendation Seven:** The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services establish a communication protocol between social workers and children and young people in their care that will set out a procedure that will ensure continuity between social workers.

**Terms of Reference**

The purpose of the review was to increase awareness among elected members of the work of Durham County Council's Social Workers who work with children in need and on the edge of care and to hear from children and young people their opinions of the service.

The committee considered six lines of enquiry:

- (a) Cases referred into the service
- (b) Allocation of casework
- (c) Training and development of social workers
- (d) Robustness of approach to the child's journey and outcomes
- (e) Involvement of children and young people
- (f) Views of children and young people in relation to edge of care social care.

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## Schedule of Review Group Meetings

A working group of 10 members was established from the members of the committee and gathered evidence over a period of seven meetings and a visit to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub.

<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>Discussion/evidence gathering</b>
1 December 2017	Referral Pathways
7 December 2017	MASH visit
10 January 2018	Case Allocation
23 February 2018	Focus group: Newly Qualified Social Workers
12 March 2018	Focus group: Social Workers
4 April 2018	Young People's views and opinions
21 May 2018	Social Worker Training and Development

The working group received evidence from:

- Strategic Manager Families First South
- Strategic Manager Families First North
- Operations Manager
- Practice Lead – Social Work Academy
- Social Workers – this includes Newly Qualifies Social Workers via ASYE and the Academy; established social workers, team leaders.
- Senior Project Worker Investing in Children
- Young people

Thank you to all who took part in the review.