



STRENGTHS-BASED LEARNING REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

CITY OF LONDON

Review dates: 21 – 24 January 2014

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1 Rationale for the Learning Review

In order to obtain an objective view of progress made since the last Ofsted Inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After services in April 2012, Ade Adetosoye, Director of People Services, commissioned a Strengths-based Learning Review (SLR) to be conducted in collaboration with two operational managers and two external experts.

The SLR approach to evaluating the impact of services is in line with the new Working Together to Safeguard Children guidelines (2013), which stipulates:

“There should be a culture of continuous learning and improvement across the organisations that work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, identifying opportunities to draw on what works and promote good practice.”

The Learning Review was intended to assist in providing an independent analysis of strengths and areas for continued attention. Although informed by the revised evaluation and grade descriptors published by Ofsted in December 2013, the review did not include one-to-one meetings with children and young people, carers and parents. There was no scrutiny of Out of Hours arrangements, of the Local Safeguarding Board (LSCB) in full, or commissioning.

It is hoped that the methodology will be of value when completing self-assessments.

To the credit of the team reviewed, they responded in a willing and open manner.

2 Methodology

An underpinning principle of the SLR was partnership, and bringing together external expertise with local operational knowledge. In line with Ofsted’s latest guidance, the main focus of the SLR was the child’s journey and experiences through the Social Care system with partners’ contributions also being reviewed.

The process included: pre-site visit reading, data analysis and reading of information submitted in line with Ofsted’s current requirements. There was scrutiny of 17 case files, review of supervision records, discussions with Social Workers linked to case files, and a range of interviews with staff from different agencies, group discussions, meetings, visits and observations.

Details of those involved:

- The Director, Assistant Director, Service Manager Children’s Social Care, Service Manager Early Years and Education, Team Manager Children’s Social Care, Team Manager Adult Social Care, Independent Reviewing Officers.

Others interviewed were:

- Early Intervention workers, representatives from Sir John Cass Primary School, representatives from LSCB, health representatives, police representatives, education representatives. Social Workers and Team Managers responsible for the tracked cases were also interviewed.

Observations:

- A meeting with a young person who had Care Leaver status
- A Child in Need meeting
- A Looked After Child review
- A visit to a family

3 The Review Outcomes: Safeguarding Services

3.1 Overall Effectiveness

Early intervention services are relatively new so are not yet embedded in the overall service context. The new lead worker, in post since October 2013, knows the area well and has established good relationships with partners. Action has been taken to facilitate all agencies being aware of the early help offer, how it is accessed and the step-up/step-down process.

There are good relationships between social care services and the Sir John Cass Primary School and Children's Centre. There was evidence seen of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) being used although considered an onerous tool by some agency representatives. There was evidence of multi-agency training (with good analysis) about the use of the CAF and the early help offer.

All referrals were dealt with immediately and there is no delay evident in respect of allocation. Management decision-making was clear, regular and meaningful on case recordings. The Team Manager responsible for the service was readily available for consultation and gave good clear directions.

The duty service was provided on a rota basis by all Social Workers within the team, although because of the low number of referrals at the time of the review, it was not possible to see this work in action. However, evidence was seen of recent referrals into the service, their allocation and subsequent services offered.

The Children's Social Care Team is a small team of committed staff who appear to work well together. Their caseloads were relatively small, all having under 12 cases, providing the capacity for in-depth pieces of work.

All incoming work is allocated immediately by the Team Manager, who has the overview of staff caseloads. All s.47 enquiries and investigations were responded to promptly by an experienced member of the team and where appropriate, evidence of joint working with the local police was seen. Social Workers within the team had been trained in ABE interviews and used the training and skills gained where possible.

The two meetings attended by reviewers provided evidence of good partnership working between social care, police, housing and health services. Statutory visits to all of the children tracked were carried out in a timely manner. Social Workers spent time on their own with children; visiting their homes, having a good understanding of what was happening and recording their work well.

Workforce

Staff interviewed were positive about working for the City of London and viewed it as a good employer. Staff reported good access to relevant training as seen within the supervision files and training evaluation forms.

A comment made to reviewers about training was that in order to cement the learning, practice opportunities needed to be regularly available. Ideas about cross-borough shadowing have not yet been taken forward. It is recommended that these are pursued as there are many authorities that would be pleased to assist.

Staff reported a supportive working culture that has progressed over the last two years. The staff team are settled and appear to function cohesively. There was a high degree of trust and respect for the Team Manager and Service Manager. The senior management team were keen to hear staff views and had set up monthly surgeries where staff attend in order to have their say. A staff evaluation about working in the City was also undertaken. The actions taken as a result were not shared with the reviewers and will be important to outline to staff and to Ofsted.

All managers had taken up training opportunities. The Service Manager and the Team Manager are both undertaking postgraduate training.

City, Hackney Safeguarding Children's Board (CHSCB) *based on only one interview with the chairperson*

The CHSCB chairperson was very positive about relationships with senior managers in the City of London, commenting on how the leadership style of the Director adds value. He outlined the strengths including the ability to Peer Review, with the City of London being scrutinised the same as Hackney. He planned to spend one day per month understanding the particular issues for the City.

The chair stated the intention to improve the Board's focus on the impact of safeguarding services. Service user and front-line staff feedback should also be a priority. In relation to the priorities of the LSCB, the chair acknowledged that the current joint Business Plan needed further work to draw the key issues for attention. Work was underway to revise the vision and principles.

Local LSCB

The local LSCB meeting, held quarterly, had good representation from partners in schools (private and public), Health Police and other agencies. The group had been working to address a communication strategy.

There had been work to get in place Child Sexual Exploitation Procedures and some discussion about embedding the role of the LADO. It is recommended that further work is undertaken with this group before the Ofsted inspection as it was not possible to get full responses, perhaps because the meeting with the reviewer was only for an hour. The chair of the wider LSCB may also want to make an explicit link with this local group.

3.2 The experience and progress of children who need help and protection

Thresholds and the Interface with Early Help

From the observations undertaken and scrutiny of cases, it appears that children and young people who are, or who are likely to be at risk of harm, were promptly and appropriately identified. The role of universal tier 1 and 2 services in identifying safeguarding appeared to be well-understood. Thresholds were good, consistent and appropriate but different to neighbouring boroughs which were responding to higher levels of need and demand. An example was the CAMHS service commissioned from a neighbouring local authority, which appeared to want to end their involvement with a child without pursuing the concerns to the depth that was required.

Early help staff had a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, with good communication being evident between them. There is still work to do to secure the use of the CAF as a positive tool for responding to need at the Children's Centre, although it was clear from observation and interviews that the Children's Centre is viewed very positively in the community. There was clear evidence of the 'Team around the Family' model being used within the early help arena, validated by feedback from other partner agencies.

The operational management of the Early Help Co-ordinator rests with the Team Manager for the social care team. It appears that the strategic lead was shared between the Social Care Service Manager and the Service Manager for Education and Early Years, the rationale for which was unclear with some evidence of confusion for operational staff. Attention is required to secure clarity and understanding for all.

3.3 Children in Need (CIN)

Four cases were fully scrutinised including an observation of a Child in Need meeting. There was evidence that work with Children in Need was given priority by Social Workers with all cases having up-to-date plans with appropriate other agencies involved. The plans were detailed, outlining roles and responsibilities. All plans should have included timescales and did not.

It was clear from the recording and through discussions, that reviews of CIN plans were held regularly. However, records revealed a lack of focus in respect of pathways out of the social care service with work possibly being longer than necessary.

The records show that children and families were well engaged. Social Workers could articulate the difference they were making during discussions but not as much in recordings. It was less clear that service users' views had been sought about the impact of services. It would be of value to get feedback differentiating between children, young people, parents and carers, showing evidence of service development as a result.

3.4 Children subject to a Child Protection Plan

At the time of the review, two children were subject to a Child Protection Plan with the charring service being delivered by an independently commissioned organisation whose child protection charring function was not scrutinised during this review. The Child Protection Plans accurately reflected the concerns and showed evidence of good partnership working to reduce risk. The plans were lengthy but included expected outcomes for the children. There was evidence of good core group meetings being held regularly and being attended by parents and partner agencies.

On one of the cases tracked, a young person had attended a part of the initial conference and the first core group. However, a decision had been made for her not to attend subsequent core group meetings, the rationale for which was not clearly recorded. In discussion with the reviewers, the allocated Social Worker was able to give the reason for the decision. It is recommended that such reasons are outlined on the case records. Such decisions should also be reviewed in the event that the situation changes.

It was clear from the case recording and through discussions with Social Workers that the children are at the centre of their work. Children and young people appear to be well known to Social Workers who talked about them at length with warmth and a clear desire to make a difference. However, recording did not sufficiently reflect this passion for children. This is not a comment about writing more, it is a comment to encourage Social Workers to be confident about recording their work in a succinct way, including the difference they want to make and then track the extent to which they are achieving it.

None of the files tracked related to children subject to court proceedings. Experience of this type of work may be helpful to seek from another local authority, perhaps via shadowing opportunities or even co-working.

3.5 Looked After Children

Six records of Looked After Children were scrutinised along with discussions with the relevant Social Worker and the Team Manager. The case recording on the files was up-to-date and of a good standard. The basic information record was comprehensively written with information on the child or young person, along with helpful subsidiary information relating to other important people in the child's life. There were also full chronologies. There were copies of Form Fs relating to carers on some of the children's files. There was no stand-alone risk assessment for Looked After Children and workers considered that this was implicit in documentation. It is recommended that Appendix 1 to this report be considered and developed further.

Placements for Looked After Children are commissioned using two preferred providers with whom there are long-standing relationships. Children and young people appear to have been provided with good quality placements with the foster carers who gave feedback, articulating how much they valued

working for the City of London due to the level of responsiveness and engagement with them. One carer stated that she did not want to work for any other local authority because of this.

If the two providers are unable to find placements, the Pan London arrangements are triggered. However, the process used for finding a foster placement was not formally outlined and should be.

Decision-making was generally clear and regular on Looked After Children records, particularly in relation to decisions about movement of children, legal status and other significant changes. On two of the tracked children files, a decision had been made that contact should not be held at a parent's home address. The rationale was vague, outlined as "in the child's best interests" with no further explanation recorded. In addition, there were no details given about whether the decision would be reviewed in the future. Such decisions should be clearly outlined and kept under review.

There was evidence that statutory visits were being carried out and Social Workers knew the children they were working with. Social Workers visited placements, viewed children's bedrooms and saw the children on their own. Some evidence of direct work with children and young people was seen, however, this could be more in-depth and focused. There was evidence of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs) being undertaken but not for all children and young people.

The reviewing of Looked After Children is independently commissioned. The observation of a Looked After Child review evidenced chairing that was competent and professional. The young person was seen prior to the review. An interpreter was used because English was a second language, the foster carer was seen on their own and the young person was clearly 'at the centre' of the review. The review addressed actions agreed at the previous review and progress made. New actions were identified in line with the young person's current circumstances with decisions about who was responsible for taking them forward and the timescale. The review took account of the young person's cultural and religious needs.

Discussions with an IRO about the areas for attention and strengths yielded feedback that progress has been made in recent times. Social Workers conveyed children's views, and considered them separately where there were sibling groups, although there is still more work to be done on this. In one case it was thought that the Social Worker needed to develop greater confidence in articulating the rationale for decisions.

There is not a discreet Children In Care Council (CICC) reportedly because of the size of the Looked After Children population. However, a service called Gateway has been commissioned to assist. This area requires further thought including whether a virtual CICC is needed, using social networks and technology to unite the looked after population. It would be an example of good practice if Looked After Children were engaged with service improvement and there was clear evidence of the impact of their views.

There is awareness that the educational achievement and tracking in respect of Looked After Children requires development. There is no current Head of the Virtual School. The PEP forms were completed and on the files although they were very lengthy and not education focused enough with achievement targets needing to be outlined. In addition, feedback from the reviewing service was that Social Workers were not sufficiently involved in children's schools. The Virtual Head's role should help with ensuring education expertise is applied to discussions with schools.

The records viewed and discussion with Social Workers suggests that the health services involvement with Looked After Children had improved. Health assessments were carried out within timescales and were regularly reviewed.

On all of the six tracked cases no life story work was seen. This was discussed with Social Workers and the Team Manager. All were aware of the need, which given the manageable caseloads, should be achievable.

3.6 Care Leavers

Care Leavers are a high proportion of Looked After Children, a number of which are unaccompanied asylum seekers with additional complex needs. Recording on their files was of a good standard with the front sheets being completed and helpful information giving a snapshot of who was involved with the young people. All of the chronologies were up-to-date and completed in a meaningful manner.

There was no discreet Care Leavers service but until recently most of the care leavers were allocated to one worker. This changed in 2013 and now all Social Workers hold a mixture of cases, including care leavers – the rationale being to spread expertise and prevent the reliance on one person.

There was clear evidence of Social Workers knowing the young people they were responsible for and they were able to give a good account of the work being carried out and the young person's situation. The verbal account matched the electronic records. During a meeting with a Care Leaver the Team Manager demonstrated that she was aware of the young person's history, having discussed and read the recording.

Partnership working was seen on Care Leavers' files and through discussion with the Social Workers but it appeared that communication with Housing needed to be strengthened as evidenced via observation of a meeting. The Care Leaver had been waiting for four years for Housing from another local authority which angered him and could have been resolved if alternate plans had been made about City of London accommodation. This one issue had affected the young person's view of the local authority. Senior Managers undertook to act on this matter during the review.

All of the tracked children had pathway plans that were good, regularly updated and had been completed with the young people. There was strong evidence of children remaining in fostering placements post-18, in response to their emotional and educational needs. One of the care leavers was living in a Staying Put arrangement which was the right decision for that young person. However, the difference between the foster placement and the Staying Put arrangement was not clear on the file. There should be a Staying Put agreement in place so that young people can understand the difference for them and the carer can also be clear.

There was evidence of post-18 education for Care Leavers and some level of social work support for these arrangements. Tracking of the achievements was lacking, along with an emphasis on Care Leavers attending higher education such as university. A view was expressed that care leavers could not afford to go to university. Little effort was evident of tenaciously pursuing relevant funding. There was also no stand-alone risk assessment.

4 Casework Recording

In the different areas of Children's Social Care there were numerous examples of good casework recording. Chronologies of a good standard being full, relevant and up-to-date were seen on all but one file. There should be chronologies on all files.

The recording showed good evidence of children being seen on their own; in their own environments and their views being gathered. However, further work to reduce the amount of descriptive narrative should be undertaken.

Evident in some of the case recording is the difference that services are making to children's lives – although the descriptive nature of recording made it difficult to see this.

5 Leadership and Governance

Senior Managers were committed to supporting the service and to its continuous improvement. The Director has been in post for less than a year and is well-regarded by partners who appreciate the leadership he has been providing. Staff consider that the service is more valued now than ever before, although the history is still impacting on their confidence.

Together with the Assistant Director, the Director has given a firm commitment to understanding what is working well within the service and what requires further development in a drive to achieve the best service possible, moving the external judgement from good to outstanding.

The context for children services in the City of London is unique. The population is small with under 800 children. Business is at the heart of the operating environment with a concentration of affluent dwellers, lower levels of need and challenges as a result.

A possible obstacle to achieving the stated aspiration of being judged as an outstanding service was a lack of confidence about the strengths and expertise that Social Workers and managers have developed as a result of working with the population in the City of London. Specifically, these include how to work with affluent service users who can challenge from positions of knowledge and confidence; how to overcome the challenges faced by working with Private Schools and Nurseries to secure their understanding of their safeguarding roles, including understanding the role of the LADO. Another strength was the competence of the Police at responding to their Safeguarding responsibilities. In short, the City of London could share its expertise.

A factor that appears to contribute to the lack of confidence was the limited opportunity to get experience of different types of work such as court proceedings, the new PLO and perhaps other challenging situations, although managers had that experience prior to working in the City. An easy remedy would be to shadow workers in other Local Authorities. Co-working could also be arranged.

Celebrating the opportunities afforded by working in the City of London including manageable caseloads, good training opportunities, and the potential for good in-depth practice such as those seen in the MST or similar models, should yield good returns.

Another area in which the City of London should strive to excel because of the size of the service user cohort, is user involvement and contribution to service delivery and improvement.

The Corporate Parenting drive, which appears to have been lacking, now requires attention to join up all services from agencies including housing and education. The understanding of other departments about their responsibilities to Looked After Children and Care Leavers was not ascertained during this review.

The Virtual Head expertise is required. This gap was acknowledged with feedback that appointment to the role was imminent. The gap appears to have impacted educational aspirations for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. Tracking of achievement and attainment should be routine. This post could also be outward facing with the schools and educational establishments and should assist the Social Workers to complete more impactful PEPs.

The arrangements for finding placements, including the Pan London arrangements, appear to be working well. A written procedure would be helpful particularly as placement finding is not an everyday task. The placements scrutinised appeared to be of a good quality, however, it would have been useful to have seen unannounced visits completed by Managers, randomly testing out the quality of the service being provided.

It was unclear to the reviewers whether there was a Sufficiency Strategy and/or Placements Strategy in respect of placements, and if not in place it requires attention. These should help the team to know their options for placements, including the Staying-Put Scheme, Supported Lodgings scheme and other accommodation. It would also be useful for young people.

It was made clear to the reviewers that much of the placement finding activity is provided by the commissioning team (not reviewed). The links between the commissioning service and social care should be well evidenced for the Ofsted inspection.

Quality Assurance

The quality of audits undertaken by Senior Managers was generally good in so far as they were detailed and identified issues for attention. If these audits are to be the main quality assurance endeavour, auditors may also need to focus on the voice of the child in casework and the impact of interventions on the life of the child. Peer and line-management auditing should supplement the cross-directorate auditing that is in place.

There appeared to be little evidence of follow-through actions after audit, a matter to be remedied as it will be important to explicitly outline the actions taken in response to audit findings and the difference made as a result.

The records of supervision generally evidenced good quality. The supervision meeting observed was conducted well with appropriate challenge provided by the Team Manager. To improve further, audits should be undertaken with periodic analysis of what has changed/improved as a result.

The quality assurance role of the independently commissioned chairing and reviewing service is beginning to get attention from internal managers. An IRO shared a desire to engage with senior managers at regular intervals to give feedback about what could improve.

Recommendations

Leadership and Strategic Focus

- Develop a continuous self-challenging focus which expects the best possible practice
- Increase the focus on education of Looked After Children and Care Leavers, in particular including the Virtual Head Teacher
- Increase the focus on embedding awareness of the safeguarding agenda, particularly in relation to the Private schools and nurseries
- Consider how to convey the importance of Corporate Parenting across departments and agencies
- Address the roles and responsibilities of the two strategic leads for early help and make it clear to operational staff

Operational and Strategic Leadership Matters

- Take the time to consider the identity of the City of London social care service in relation to its strengths, facilitating pride and confidence in the work being undertaken, pushing further to achieve excellence
- Progress with the use of the electronic recording systems, thereby reducing the need for hard copy files as well
- Ensure that all supervision is held monthly with reasons outlined if not
- Regularly record the informal supervision that is provided
- Ensure consistency in the documentation on all files i.e. if permanency is underway, place a Form F on file together with the matching document, the permanence report and risk assessment (*if adopted*)
- Produce placement finding procedure for the social work team

Social Work Practice – Team Manager Leadership

- Encourage Social Workers to consistently talk about and record the difference their work is making to the lives of children and families
- Make the rationale for decisions clear, specific and recorded
- Consistently record the direct work completed by Social Workers
- Give deliberate thought to achieving more in-depth work (particularly given the manageable caseloads and the fact that Social Workers have good relationships with the children)
- Address differentiated feedback from children and young people, parents and carers to inform service improvement and delivery

Workforce Development

- Make clear the impact of the very good training opportunities (via supervision)

- Progress the plan to link with other Local Authorities (perhaps wider than neighbours to secure shadowing/co-working so as to help with experiences that may not be possible because of the service user profile)

Supervision

- Take action to ensure all supervision is held monthly and if not record the reason
- Audit all files to ensure compliance with standards by all
- Continue with the work to make supervision more reflective
- Work to ensure that records of supervision outline more clearly how it challenges practice and behaviours

Quality Assurance

- When undertaking auditing, do so alongside workers so that the best possible understanding of the challenges and strengths can be secured.
- Consider Social Worker peer auditing
- Ensure that there are records of follow-through of the actions required by audit
- Consider observation of practice by managers as part of the quality assurance framework
- Consider how the IRO and CP chairing service could better fulfil their quality assurance role by engaging with them further

Child Protection

- Strengthen involvement of children in child protection conferences/core groups
- Inform service development with feedback from parents, carers and children

Children in Need

- Work to secure more focused Children in Need plans
- Make clear to parents and children the routes through the service
- Make explicit to all the step-down pathways

Looked After Children and Care Leavers

- Develop a Sufficiency/Placement strategy to enable workers to be explicit about what is available
- Address educational achievements and attainments of Looked After Children and Care Leavers supported by the role of the Virtual Head Teacher
- Take action to get the role of the Head of the Virtual School in place and embedded in the service
- Take action to obtain feedback from Looked After Children, ensuring they can convey the difference made as a result

- Complete SDQs for all Looked After Children
- Undertake unannounced visits by managers to placement

CHSCB

- Progress with the work planned to get a clearer focus on priorities and impact (making explicit the priorities for City of London)
- Consider ensuring a strong focus on feedback from service users and front-line staff across all agencies
- For the City Safeguarding Board – consider better preparation for scrutiny under inspection conditions before the Ofsted inspection