



**Scrutiny Review into Safeguarding
Children, Young People and Families OSC**

**Final Report
September 2010**

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1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Within recent years there have been a number of tragic and high profile child protection cases, which have highlighted systemic failings in child protection processes and the application of those processes, leading to missed opportunities to protect children from harm. Such cases have led to increased momentum at a national level to ensure the effectiveness of local safeguarding practices. Additionally, they have led to increased awareness amongst professionals and the public regarding safeguarding issues.
- 1.2 It is within this context that Warwickshire, inline with other local authorities, has experienced a significant increase in the number of referrals made to children services. Over the last 18 months, the service has experienced a 25% increased in referrals. This has led to an unprecedented number of looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan. In April 2010, there were 579 looked after children and 514 children subject to a child protection plan in Warwickshire.
- 1.3 Conscious of the pressures facing the Children in Need Division, in November 2009 the Children, Young People and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee commissioned a Task and Finish Group to scrutinise the effectiveness of child protection processes within Warwickshire and to establish the impact and implications of the increased demand. This report summarises the findings and recommendations from the review.

2. The Task and Finish Group

- 2.1 The Task and Finish Group consisted of the following members.



Cllr Jackson



Cllr Johnston



Cllr Perry



**Cllr Ross
(Chair)**

3. Scope of the Review

3.1 The review focussed specifically upon the reactionary element of child protection and the effectiveness of practices and processes which are instigated once a concern regarding a child has been raised. National policy and legislative issues were considered to fall outside the scope of the review.

3.2 The objectives of the review were:

- 1) To understand the picture of increased demand for child protection services, how increased demand is being managed and its impact upon caseloads, risks and staff morale
- 2) To understand disparities in demand and practice across Warwickshire and to narrow the gaps in demand and practice to ensure that the services received by children, young people and their families is not determined by where they live
- 3) To understand workforce issues that impact upon practice eg. Recruitment and retention, training and support
- 4) To establish the effectiveness of partnership working, in particular:
 - the effectiveness of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and its alignment to the Safeguarding Process and
 - the ability / knowledge of professionals working with children and young people to identify and communicate causes of concern, particularly classroom Teachers
- 5) To review action plans put in place to address comments in the Joint Area Review (JAR) and the recommendations from the Laming Review
- 6) To identify and address gaps in services
- 7) To recognise and promote achievements of safeguarding services internally and externally.

4. The review process

4.1 The Task and Finish Group undertook the review by meeting with a range of individuals involved in safeguarding, to gain an insight into their views and experiences, this included:

- The Head of Service for Children in Need Division
- Warwickshire Safeguarding Children Board Development Manager
- Social Workers and Operational Managers
- Independent Reviewing Team
- Designated Nurse for child protection
- Teachers with designated responsibility for child protection
- Multi-agency Training Service
- Warwickshire Police
- Warwickshire County Council's Young People Legal Service

4.2 The Task and Finish Group also undertook site visits to Child Protection Teams in each area of the County to speak to social workers and to gain an understanding of different issues across the County. Additionally, the Task and Finish Group attended a meeting of the Looked After Children Council,

where Councillors were able to hear the views and experiences of looked after young people.

- 4.3 The Task and Finish Group would like to sincerely thank everyone who participated in the review. Without the willingness of individuals to engage in the review, it would have been difficult for the Task and Finish Group to develop a true picture of safeguarding within Warwickshire.

5. Key findings and recommendations

- 5.1 Through the evidence submitted by various 'witnesses' and through the site visits to the Child Protection Teams across the County, the Task and Finish Group is confident that the systems and processes in place to protect children from harm within Warwickshire are extremely robust and effective. Particular strengths of Warwickshire's approach to child protection include having a dedicated officer to liaise with schools regarding safeguarding issues (Education Safeguarding Manager) and robust checks and balances in place to ensure appropriate actions in response to referrals.
- 5.2 The Task and Finish Group were overwhelmed by the dedication and commitment of all those working within the child protection field. It is recognised that those working in child protection, particularly social workers, do not always receive adequate recognition and thanks for the valuable work that they undertake. The Task and Finish Group is in no doubt that Warwickshire's social workers have managed exceptionally well, in extremely difficult circumstances and would like to take this opportunity to thank all social workers for their hard work and dedication.
- 5.3 However, it is fundamentally important that the County Council and other partners do not become complacent and continually seek to improve safeguarding processes and practices. In this vein, the Task and Finish Group have identified a number of areas of improvements which would further strengthen the systems and processes in place. These are summarised below.

Managing the Increased Workload

- 5.4 The significant increase in the number of referrals and the number of children subject to a child protection has inevitably had a significant impact on the workloads of social workers. In order to manage the increased level of need, the service is focussing upon prioritising those cases that meet the statutory thresholds for child protection. The significantly high number of referrals has meant that it is currently impossible to deal with every referral received. Consequently, social workers are promoting the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) for non-child protection cases. The Task and Finish Group support this approach.
- 5.5 Yet, even with this prioritisation, the workload of social workers has increased significantly. The high numbers of referrals and caseloads in some areas of the County inevitably raises questions as to whether there is sufficient

capacity to meet the level of demand within an acceptable level of risk. 'Witnesses' expressed concerns to the Task and Finish Group that social workers were being over stretched. The limited capacity of the service has been recognised by the Children, Young People and Families Directorate, with £500k of redistributed resources being allocated to the Children in Need Division to manage the increased demand. This funding has been used to create 10 new frontline social workers posts. The Task and Finish Group welcomes the recruitment of 10 additional frontline social workers in order to manage the increased demand. However, the recruitment to these posts is likely to have a long lead in time before having demonstrable impact on current caseload levels, as demand continues to rise. Therefore, these additional posts cannot be considered a solution.

- 5.6 The Task and Finish Group were concerned with the differential caseloads of social workers across the County. In North Warwickshire, some social workers were handling 21 cases. This level of caseloads is not replicated across the County. In Warwick, social workers were managing 12 cases, with approximately 10 being child protection cases. In Bedworth, social workers were managing 8 cases, whereas in Nuneaton social workers were managing 6/7 cases. It is recognised that it is difficult to compare caseloads like for like, as the complexity and resource requirements of each case vary considerably. Nevertheless, it is important to ensure that there is equity in the level and type of caseloads that social workers are required to manage. In order to achieve a degree of equity in the level and mix of cases, a maximum caseload level should be introduced, which takes into consideration different complexity of cases.
- 5.7 It is also fundamentally important to ensure that newly qualified social workers are allocated appropriate levels and complexity of cases. Whilst in some areas of the County newly qualified social workers had protected caseloads and were expected to build up a level of expertise before fully taking on the accountability for a case, this approach did not appear to be commonplace across the County. In particular, in North Warwickshire, some newly qualified social workers (with less than 12 months experience) were reported to be managing up to 19 cases. It is recognised that caseloads for NQSWs will vary in nature across the county and will reflect the overall nature of cases within the team. Additionally, the allocation of work to NQSWs has to balance the need for them to learn within a supported environment and for them to be challenged and stretched to meet national competencies. However, the Task and Finish Group felt that such a differential level of caseloads among NQSWs requires investigation.
- 5.8 The importance of ensuring protected caseloads for newly qualified social workers has been recognised nationally through the recommendations of the Social Work Taskforce. Moreover, there are already a number of initiatives in place in Warwickshire to support NQSWs. Warwickshire is part of the NQSW national pilot programme, which requires NQSWs to have a protected caseload of 10% in volume and access to training and development equal to 10% of their workload. Additionally, all NQSWs receive formal supervision with their line manager on a fortnightly basis during their first three months.

The Task and Finish Group is of the view that the current arrangements in place to support NQSWs, including protected caseloads, be reviewed immediately in order to ensure NQSWs are receiving appropriate support and are not being over-burdened due to the current demand issues facing the service.

- 5.9 To some extent, the differential levels of work across the county reflect the differential demographics across the county. Nevertheless, the differential caseloads across the County, raises questions as to whether resources are currently being deployed to maximum optimisation. With some areas experiencing more significant increases in referrals and children subject to a child protection plan than others, there is a need to ensure that resources are deployed on a proportionate basis, so that resources are spread efficiently across the county to match the differing demands.
- 5.10 Inevitably, with unprecedented pressures on public finance, it is likely that, like other services, the Children in Need Division will be required to achieve a certain level of savings. However, child protection is a demand led service which is underpinned by statutory requirements. Therefore, the Task and Finish Group is of the view that any savings targets required of the service should not be at level where frontline provision is jeopardised. The current levels of frontline social workers need to be maintained if the level of demand is to be met effectively. Reducing the numbers of frontline social workers would present an unacceptable level of risk.

Recommendations

- A** The Head of Service for the Children In Need Division the review current arrangements in place to support newly qualified social workers, including protected caseloads, to ensure that:
- Newly qualified social workers are receiving appropriate support and are not being over burdened
 - Support arrangements are implemented consistently across the county
- B** The Head of Service for the Children In Need Division review the levels and mix of caseloads across the County to ensure equity and implement a maximum level of caseloads.
- C** The Head of Service for the Children In Need Division be requested to review current resource allocation across the County and ensure that resources are proportionally allocated to match the different levels of demand across the County
- D** Current levels of frontline social workers be maintained in order to ensure demand is met within an acceptable level of risk

Structure and Accommodation

- 5.11 Whilst the level of frontline provision should be maintained, the Task and Finish Group is of the view that the structure and accommodation of the service could be changed in order to release some resources.
- 5.12 The Task and Finish Group is of the view that the following options be explored.
- Merging area teams to realise management, back-office and accommodation savings, whilst protecting frontline resources. Any merger should provide clear efficiencies without jeopardising frontline resources.
 - Rationalisation of office accommodation, through relocation to less expensive accommodation or co-location with other public service providers for example the Police's Child Protection Unit. Clearly, any accommodation used needs to be easily accessible and have sufficient facilities to provide privacy and confidentiality for individuals visiting the office.
- 5.13 The Task and Finish Group is of the view that any savings realised through changes to office accommodation from the above should be ring-fenced to further support front-line work within safeguarding.
- 5.14 Any changes to structure and office location should ensure services currently provided are continued, for example providing venues for contact with children and venues for multi-agency meetings, and be mindful of the need to maintain strong relationships with local partners.

Recommendations

E The Head of Service for Children in Need Division explore the following options:

- **Merging area teams to realise management, back-office and accommodation savings, whilst protecting frontline resources.**
- **Rationalisation of office accommodation, through relocation to less expensive accommodation or co-location with other public service providers for example the Police's Child Protection Unit.**

F Any savings realised through changes to office accommodation from the above be ring-fenced to further support front-line work within safeguarding

Thresholds and Processes

- 5.15 Guidance regarding the thresholds for child protection cases is contained in the Blue Book which is provided to all relevant professionals. However, the review highlighted that the guidance regarding thresholds within the Blue Book is interpreted differently by different professionals. The Task and Finish Group heard examples where teachers had considered that thresholds for child protection had been met, but this view had not been shared by social workers. Concern was also raised that the interpretation of thresholds within children services may vary across the county. Such variation in interpretation needs to be addressed and cross professional understanding improved.
- 5.16 In addition to differential interpretations regarding thresholds, the review highlighted that there was a lack of common understanding regarding safeguarding processes. Teachers involved in the review highlighted that there had been instances where they had been unable to access advice from the local Children Services offices and were uncertain where advice could be accessed from in such instances. Additionally, Teachers stated that they were not aware of how to challenge the advice given if they did not agree with it.
- 5.17 The Task and Finish Group found that this was not attributable to a lack of information. All schools had been provided with information regarding contact points for advice and the escalation process, which is designed to manage different professional views. Therefore, it appeared that the information was available but may not have been effectively communicated to schools. Consequently, the Task and Finish Group is of the view the view that communication of information regarding thresholds and processes could be further improved.
- 5.18 Whilst it is recognised that it is difficult to provide an absolute guide, as each case is inevitably different, the Task and Finish Group is of the view that the process could be better described so that all professionals have an easy and accessible reference point. The Task and Finish Group recognise that this information is already available, but consideration needs to be given to how the information is presented and communicated. The Task and Finish Group suggests a poster outlining key information and contact details be provided to schools and other relevant partners to display within offices. This would provide a visual aid to increase awareness and understanding surrounding thresholds and referral processes.
- 5.19 The Task and Finish Group were made aware that workshops had been recently be held in each district area, to promote open discussions between partner agencies regarding thresholds, referrals and case studies. The Task and Finish Group welcome this approach.

Recommendations

- G** **Warwickshire’s Safeguarding Children Board consider how the presentation and communication of information regarding thresholds and referral processes can be improved in light of the issues raised within this review.**
- H** **Warwickshire’s Safeguarding Children Board provide schools and other relevant partners with a poster outlining key information and contact details to be displayed in office areas.**
- I** **Schools be requested to display the poster produced by Warwickshire’s Safeguarding Children Board as outlined in recommendation H, to increase awareness and understanding regarding thresholds and referral processes**

Partnership Working

- 5.20 Whilst partnership working within Warwickshire overall appears to be effective, the review highlighted a number of areas where partnership working could be improved.

GP’s

- 5.21 There was a general consensus that the input from GP’s in case conferences is invaluable, particularly in complex cases, however the attendance of GP’s seems to be variable. NHS Warwickshire are aware of the issue and have started working with the local medical council to help support GP’s to fulfil their safeguarding role. Whilst GP engagement with case conferences is not explicitly included in GP’s contracts, it is hoped that engaging the local medical council will influence GP’s to engage more consistently with case conferences. Nevertheless, the Task and Finish Group is of the view that this issue should be explored further by the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Information Sharing

- 5.22 Information sharing is central to effective safeguarding work, whilst there is no local single shared database accessible to all partner organisations, organisations recognise their statutory requirements to share information when approached by another agency. However, the teachers that contributed to the review highlighted that schools did not always pass on information regarding pupils that they transferred. Therefore, schools were not always aware if concerns had been raised about a pupil. The Task and Finish Group is of the view that all schools should be reminded of the need to provide such information when transferring pupils.
- 5.23 With the Government abolishing “Contact Point”, a national database developed to enable professionals to identify which agencies are involved with

a child, it is fundamentally important that information sharing within Warwickshire remains effective.

Funding for Warwickshire's Safeguarding Children Board

- 5.24 There is currently no national formula for deciding the financial contributions of agencies towards the management of the Warwickshire Safeguarding Children Board. Currently, funding to support the work of the Board is negotiated by partners within the Board, with all partners contributing relative amounts. It is thought that the Children Trust would be better placed to lead the discussions and decisions regarding partner contributions.

Communication

- 5.25 The review highlighted that communication could be improved between schools and social workers. Schools highlighted that they would like more dialogue and interaction with social workers and suggested that schools be allocated a specific social worker to foster better communication and partnership working. The Task and Finish Group were advised that schools had previously been allocated link social workers, which worked well but were resource intensive. The practice of link social workers had not been sustained due to the demand led pressures on the service and the need to reprioritise workloads accordingly. However, there are number of simple practices that could be adopted to further enhance communication and partnership working between schools and social workers.
- 5.26 For example, sending annual letters to schools and other organisations involved with children in the area, to explain the management structure, how to manage cases of concern and key contacts within the Team. Whilst this practice is currently undertaken in some teams, it needs to be replicated across the County. Additionally, each Team should provide schools with a key contact within the Team, to improve communication and relationship building.
- 5.27. The review also highlighted that communication between social workers and police officers was considered to be variable across the County. Some social workers thought that collaboration with the police could be improved. Indeed, particular concerns were highlighted within the Bedworth area. Warwickshire Police acknowledged that they had been aware that there were previously communication issues in Bedworth and measures had been put in place to address this, including monthly meetings. However, the Task and Finish Group is of the view that communication practices between the police and social workers across the County be reviewed in order to ensure communication is effective and opportunities for collaboration maximised.

Recommendations

- J** **The Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee explore inconsistent GP attendance at case conference with NHS Warwickshire**

- K** **The Head of Service for the Children in Need Division write to all primary and secondary schools within Warwickshire to highlight the importance of schools passing on information regarding safeguarding matters when they transfer a pupil to another school.**

- L** **Area Teams send annual letters to schools and other organisations involved with children in the area, to explain the management structure, how to manage cases of concern and key contacts within the Team. This letter should provide a key contact within the Team.**

- M** **The Head of Service for the Children in Need Division and the DCI responsible for Child Protection within Warwickshire Police review communication practices between social workers and police officers across the county in order to ensure communication is effective and opportunities for collaboration maximised.**

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Overall, the Task and Finish Group is satisfied and reassured that child protection processes and systems in place within Warwickshire are robust and effective. However, it is fundamentally important to ensure the effectiveness of current processes and systems are not damaged by the need to identify savings. The Task and Finish Group is of the view that the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee continue to undertake an overview role in relation to the issues raised within this review, particularly following the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review in the autumn.