

Children & Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

16 March 2022

Update on Child Protection

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 Committee notes the updated report detailing Child Protection Performance in Warwickshire.
- 1.2 Children & Families to continue their programme of themed audits, focusing upon areas of practice where performance is below statistical neighbours or are identified for review. The next audit to focus on strategy discussion thresholds, given the recommended action in the recent OFSTED inspection.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 OFSTED noted that in Warwickshire “Children & Young People are made safer by effective multi-agency arrangements.” “Child in need & on child protection plans evidence progress in meeting needs, many children & families benefit from a wide range of support services & interventions” (22nd November – 3rd December 2021, WCC OFSTED Report page 3)
- 2.2 OFSTED’s findings are a positive acknowledgement of the fact that we know ourselves well & have used this knowledge to improve our child in need & child protection services. Although the recent widely reported deaths of children, are reminders of the need to avoid complacency and to ensure we seek ongoing improvement in our services.
- 2.3 The Covid pandemic provided challenges to our work but throughout the pandemic our offices remained open & our staff continued to visit households. Where necessary, even when people in the household had Covid. At times our staff were the only professionals seeing these vulnerable children. Given this, it is positive our services are stronger now than at OFSTED’s 2017 visit.
- 2.4 Warwickshire Children & Families have for four years undertaken a series of themed audits aimed at improving our child protection performance & services for Warwickshire families. These audits have been led by Calvin Smith,

Service Manager for Children's Safeguarding & Support. Other mechanisms are also in place, such as the Child Protection Escalation Panel, chaired by Jo Davies, Service Manager, Practice Improvement & Principle Social Worker. These mechanisms ensure we challenge ourselves & partners.

- 2.5 Audits are undertaken by key decision makers within Warwickshire's child protection services e.g., Operation Managers, Team Leaders, Independent Reviewing Officers, staff from Practice Improvement & Service Managers. The audit process changed in the pandemic from a face-to-face, to a Microsoft Teams process. We plan to return to the face-to-face process because we believe it enhances our action learning cycle. The last 2 audits considered children subject to repeat plans & those on plans for 3 months or less.
- 2.6 After each audit, the learning is shared in workshops with the teams who complete child protection investigations & when appropriate, key partners.
- 2.7 These audits provide a continuous cycle of improvement & have resulted in:-
- Our child protection numbers being in line with our statistical neighbours.
 - Our numbers of children subject to plans for over two years being below our statistical neighbour average.
 - Repeat plans, which were out of line when last reviewed by this committee are now below regional, national & statistical neighbour averages.
 - The one key area we have struggled to provide consistent performance improvement is the timeliness of initial child protection conferences.
- 2.8 In addition to seeking to improve the rates for key indicators reported annually in the DfE Child in Need return, the audits aim to monitor & improve factors impacting the experience families. For example, ensuring we capture the voice & experience of children, the participation of parents/carers, whether plans are SMART & if our processes met our Restorative Practice goals. We had identified that a minority of our plans were not SMART, a finding in line with OFSTED's conclusions. Work is in place to address this.
- 2.9 Over the past 4 years our child protection processes have become more robust & restorative. We will adopt the learning from the OFSTED inspection & our findings to ensure we maintain our cycle of continuous improvement.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 There are no financial implications from this report.

- 3.2 The Children & Families Service received an investment of £12m (£4.9m from the Department for Education). This has enabled 16 projects in total to be undertaken which all contribute to providing support earlier for families, to avoid escalation of need and for children to stay, where it is safe, with their parents or extended family. Audits & action plans have been completed within existing resources. Whilst the benefits from the investment in new ways of working & additional services are still being evaluated, our change of culture & provision of family support has contributed to the reduction in child protection numbers from a high four years ago of 592 to 415 on 22nd February 2022. This also allows Social Workers to focus upon support for children at a child in need level, to provide support earlier to stop escalation. For families these children in need & early help services are usually less traumatic interventions. This financial year we have issued fewer care proceedings to the Family Court than in any of the previous five years. OFSTED were positive about the fact that 45% of our Public Law Outline, pre-proceedings work with children subject to child protection plans diverts families from care proceedings. Whilst these actions are around cost avoidance, this is positive for our service budget & most importantly better for children and their families.

4. Environmental Implications

- 4.1 The use of Microsoft Teams for strategy discussions & hybrid child protection meetings has reduced travel needs, thereby lessening our carbon footprint.

5. Supporting Information

- 5.1 The cycle of audits began June 2018 with an objective to improve child protection performance. At the time our child protection numbers reached 592, a rate of 52.3 per 10,000, against a national rate of 43 per 10,000 & 36 per 10,000 for our statistical neighbours. Our first thematic audit concluded that children were no more likely to experience abuse in Warwickshire than in other parts of England but that we were at times inappropriately using child protection processes. Work focused on thresholds & encouraging the use of child in need processes rather than child protection. We set no targets & have supported managers to initiate child protection investigations whenever they think necessary, but we have encouraged reflection & professional challenge. The table below illustrates the progress of this work.

Table 1 Rate of Children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan at 31 March per 10,000 of the 0-17 child population

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Warwickshire	38.8	49.0	29.8	25.1	29.3
Statistical Neighbours	35.7	34.4	34.7	31.1	30.5
England	43.3	45.3	43.7	42.8	41.4

- 5.2 Child protection numbers have risen since Covid, most likely due to the pressures on families & their isolation from professionals. There has been a more significant increase since November 2021, following the reporting of Arthur & Star’s deaths. This is a trend that often occurs after such nationally reported tragedies. On 31st January 2022 there were 401 children subject to child protection plans, or 33.7 per 10,000. We do not have up to date national data but it is likely other Local Authorities have seen similar rises. In the West Midlands, we know that from Quarter 2 to Quarter 3 the rate per 10,000 rose from 38.2 to 41.8. Warwickshire currently has the lowest child protection rate within the West Midlands. The auditing process builds in quality assurance safeguards to ensure the right children are subject to child protection plans. We are confident through our auditing that this remains the case & this was endorsed by OFSTED who found no children at risk of harm during their recent inspection. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude our performance in this area is good but we will never be complacent & continue our cycle of auditing to check, review and learn about our performance.
- 5.5 This second & fourth audits (June 2019 & May 202) considered long-running plans, as we were again out of line with our statistical neighbours. The audits clarified why plans were running long, which included waits for unnecessary assessments. Professionals had developed a pattern of requesting similar assessments on all children subject to a plan, rather than using those same resources to undertake direct work e.g. waiting for a 8 week parenting assessment, rather than completing an evidence based parenting course. We redirected recourses & completed training with teams, then repeated the audit process. It has resulted in a significant improvement in performance & reduced waiting times for families. The process has been supported via challenges from the Escalation Panel that reviews all long running plans.

Table 2 - shows Long Plans: The percentage of children who ceased to be the subject of a child protection plan during the year ending 31 March, who had been the subject of a child protection plan, continuously for two years or more.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Warwickshire	4.9%	5.9%	3.0%	2.3%	2.6%
Statistical Neighbours	3.3%	3.8%	3.7%	3.3%	4.0%
England	3.4%	3.4%	3.3%	3.6%	3.7%

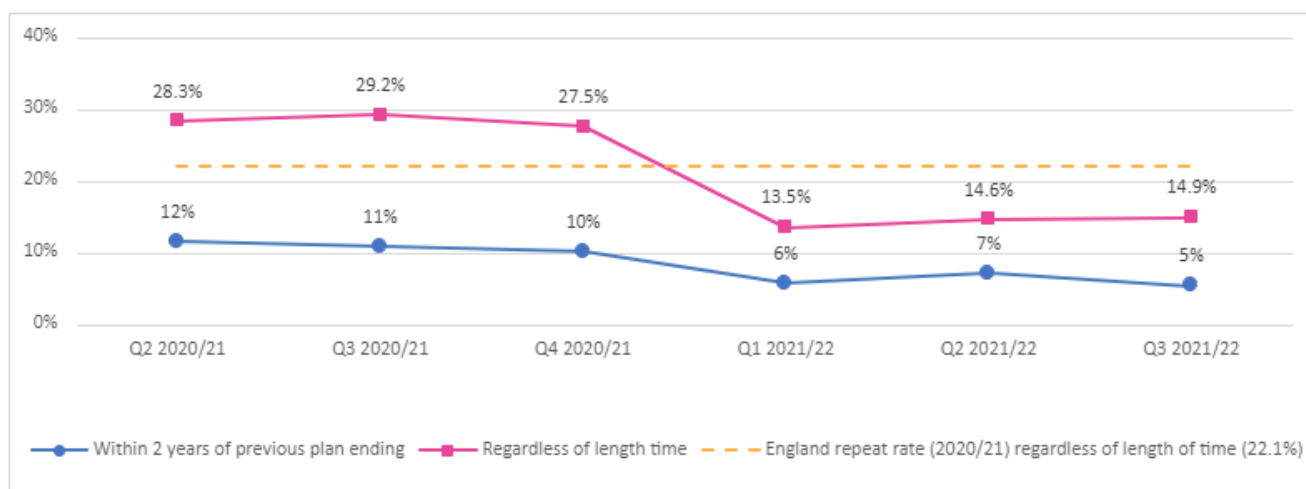
5.8 We do not yet have year-end figures for 2021/22 but this indicator has risen in Warwickshire, with professionals seemingly more anxious about ending plans during the pandemic, which is understandable. This is a trend that has been challenged & now seems to have changed; as more services recover from the pandemic. Positively, at the end of January 2022, we had no children subject to a child protection plan for over 2 years.

5.9 When last at Overview & Scrutiny (Sept 2020) we planned an audit on repeat child protection plans. Something we historically performed well on but that had declined at that time. Part of the decline was due to the fall in the total number of plans. Some months we had few repeat plans than previous years but because the total number of plans had reduced, the percentage rose.

Table 3 - Of all children who had a child protection plan initiated during the year, the proportion who became the subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Warwickshire	20.8%	18.7%	18.6%	23.8%	27.5%
Statistical Neighbours	18.9%	21.6%	22.0%	20.5%	23.2%
England	18.7%	20.2%	20.8%	21.9%	22.1%

Graph 1 - Repeat child protection plans



5.10 As can be seen from the graph above we are now below our statistical neighbour average for repeat plans. The West Midlands reports on repeat plans within two years, the average for the region is currently 10.6%.

5.11 When we last reported to O&S the 1 indicator that we had really struggled to consistently improve was our timescales for initial child protection conferences (ICPC). The DfE sets a target of 15 days between strategy discussion & ICPC, to prevent drift. It is also unreasonable to expect families to wait for such an important meeting & one that causes so much anxiety.

Tables 4 & 5 % of children whose initial child protection conferences were held within 15 working days of the initiation of the s.47 enquiries which led to the conference

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Warwickshire	76.8%	72.6%	83.1%	67.8%	69.6%
Statistical Neighbours	80.4%	84.9%	84.5%	82.4%	85.5%
England	77.2%	76.9%	78.7%	77.7%	83.0%

	Sep 21	Oct 21	Nov 21	Dec 21	Jan 22
Warwickshire	55.3%	51.4%	94.4%	100%	61.9%

5.12 We have conducted multiple audits, provided training & amended the procedures to clarify the process, yet to date consistency alludes us. We have recently introduced monthly performance meetings between Service Managers & Ops Managers & Team Leaders by team, to better understand & address issues. There is also a monthly report that managers use to explain & report reasons for any delay. We will resolve this issue, it is one of our performance priorities but it is taking longer than we wanted or expected.

5.13 Our most recent audit sought to explain & address the relatively high numbers of children on plans for less than 3 months. There are reasonable grounds for such plans e.g. the family move out of area or children come into care, but these are the same for all LA's. We wanted to understand what happened in Warwickshire for our performance to move above our statistical neighbours.

Table 6 - Short Plans: The percentage of children who ceased to be the subject of a child protection plan during the year ending 31 March, who had been the subject of a child protection plan for 3 months or less

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Warwickshire	16.0%	14.7%	16.8%	24.5%	20.8%
Statistical Neighbours	20%	21%	18%	17%	18%
England	20%	20%	18%	19%	17%

- 5.14 For our most recent audit we looked at the 56 families, 96 children who were on a plan for 3 months or less between May 2020 & June 2021. While the main reason for the short plans were those we expected; for 39% or 22 families, further investigation was required. Audits concluded that for 16 of these families, had not needed to be on a child protection plan. At times professionals appear uncertain of the risk level & opt to invoke the child protection process, “just in case”. Three months on when professionals know the family better, they end the plan as the threshold is not met. Had professionals accepted a “safe uncertainty” model & worked with the families on a child in need basis our performance would have improved. More importantly, this group of families could have avoided the stress & trauma of a child protection plan.
- 5.15 None of the 16 families identified, some of whom saw plans end in the summer of 2020 have been subject to another child protection process, which further supports the audits conclusions. These findings have been shared with managers & teams. It is believed this will help address any risk adverse approach & see this indicator improve.
- 5.16 All audits also track progress on key goals, e.g. embedding Restorative Practice; parental participation; the inclusion of children’s views & experience; and, monitoring SMART plans. The last audit saw a fall in the number of SMART plans from 84% to 73%. This finding is in line with what OFSTED found & was something already on our “Deep Dive” process to address. In the main we need to consistently provide timescales & contingency plans.
- 5.17 The audits continue to show that domestic abuse appears as a main cause for children to be on plans (to a level above the national average). The introduction of “Caring Dads” & its ongoing funding is a welcome additional service to help address this. This evidenced based perpetrator programme impressed OFSTED, especially because of the feedback from fathers.
- 5.18 The Warwickshire Family Safeguarding model being piloted in the North of the County, which sees Adult Mental Health, Substance Misuse & Domestic Abuse workers embedded in teams, is another evidence-based transformation programme that we believe will further improve our child protection service.
- 5.19 These new services & our internal processes illustrate our strategy of continuous evidenced based learning, services & improvement. A strategy that is proving successful in helping to keep Warwickshire children safe.

5.20 OFSTED questioned our number of strategy discussions & thresholds at the Front Door, suggesting we should hold more. They identified some children which they accepted would not have gone to a child protection conference but suggested a strategy discussion could have speeded the process up. We are satisfied that all children were seen & assessed in a timely manner & that our voluntary approach improved the experience for families & aided our ability to work with them. We also believe our approach is more in line with recommendations coming from Joshua McCalister's National Care Review.

5.21 Table 7 & 8 illustrate that our early child protection processes have not reduced in fact the reverse is true. Given our relatively low conversion rate between section 47 investigations & ICPC's when compared nationally & to our statistical neighbours, it is possible we are undertaking too many investigations.

Table 7 - Child Protection Activity

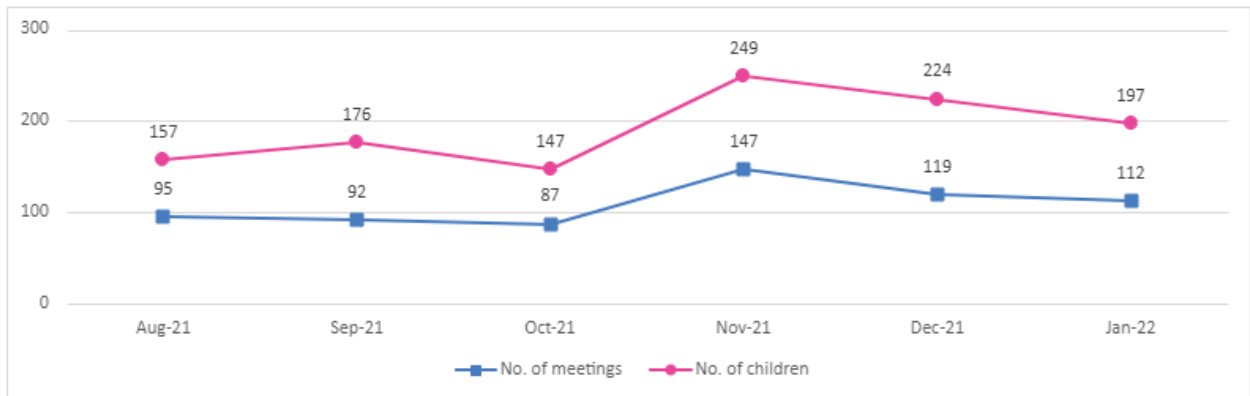
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Number of S47 Investigations initiated	1290	1426	1205	1306	1685
Number of Children subject to an Initial Child Protection Conferences during the year	555	727	623	482	527
Number of Child Protection Plans initiated during the year	496	674	516	425	480
Number of Child Protection Plans closed during the year	532	545	734	473	424
Number of Children subject to Plans at 31 March	439	563	345	295	349

Table 8 - Conversion rate of Section 47 enquiries in the year to ICPCs in the year

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Warwickshire	43%	51%	52%	37%	31%
Statistical Neighbours	46%	49%	46%	45%	41%
England	41%	40%	38%	39%	37%

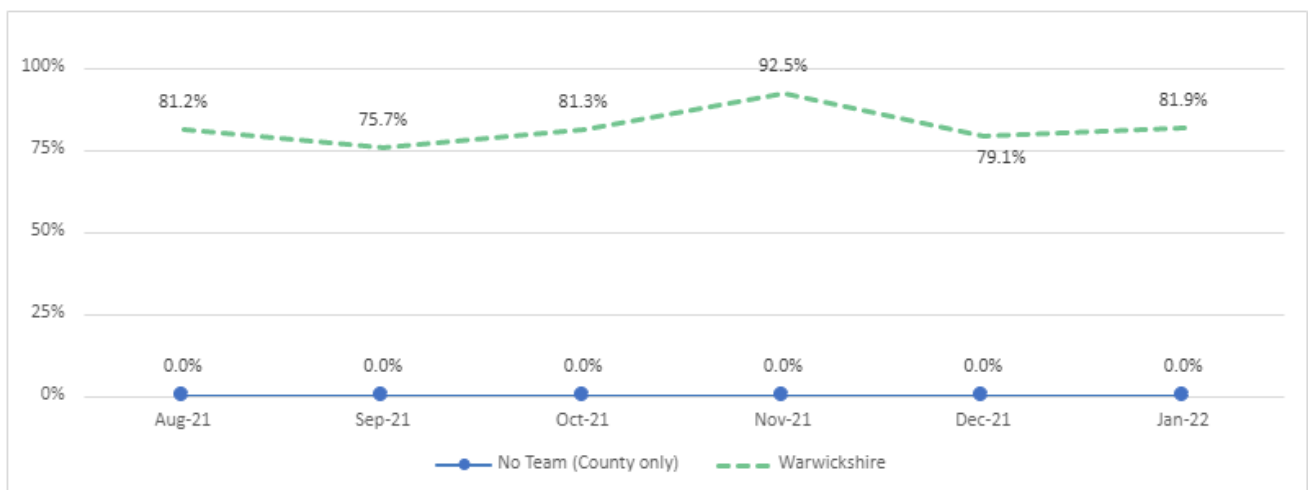
5.20 We do not report nationally on the number of strategy discussions that move on to a section 47/child protection investigation but again these numbers are significant & the graph below shows the impact of the widely reported deaths of Arthur & Star in November. An impact slow to return to more normal levels.

Graph 2 - Number of Strategy meetings & number of children that had a strategy meeting



5.22 A final key piece of our child protection process is the timeliness of our visits to children subject to plans. We are confident from audits & supervisions with social workers that these are taking place. The timeliness of recording visits is more problematic, being impacted by factors like sickness & caseloads. We measure if the visit has been recorded within 2 weeks & have a target of 90%. Graph 3 shows we are not meeting our recording target. This is being picked up with managers in our new monthly performance meetings.

Graph 3 – child protection visits



6. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

6.1 We plan to continue to complete audits approximately every six months, allowing time to embed any changes before preparing for the next one. Our goal is a cycle of continuous improvement, embedding best practice & improving services for children in need of protection.

6.2 When OFSTED were with us, they questioned if we completed enough strategy discussions at our Front Door. They could not identify any children that did not have a strategy discussion, that would have gone on to have an ICPC. However, they felt at times our voluntary approach may have slowed the assessment process. Currently the National Care Review led by Joshua McCalister is looking at the rate of investigations, using the significant rise in Strategy Meetings as a key performance indicator. The National Care Review in their initial findings felt some local authorities focussed too much on investigation and assessment and not enough on support. Nationally there has been a very significant rise in Strategy Meetings, which are the only meeting held without family present. A large number of strategy meetings nationally occur but do not lead to a child protection conference. We are confident that generally we have the right balance with support and investigation but we do plan our next audit to focus upon the quality & threshold for strategy discussions, while also focusing on those important 15 days to ICPC. We plan for this to take place in April 2022, allowing time to complete an ongoing child in need audit.

Background Papers

Previously Review Paper August 2020 presented to Overview & Scrutiny Committee 29th September 2020.

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- Members of the Children & Youth People Overview and Scrutiny Committee.