

Children & Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

29 September 2020

Update on Child Protection

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That the Committee note the updated report detailing Child Protection Performance in Warwickshire.
- 1.2 Children & Families will continue their programme of themed audits, focusing upon any areas of practice where we perform below our statistical neighbours. The next audit to focus upon understanding and resolving our relatively high numbers of repeat child protection plans.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Warwickshire Children & Families have for the last two and a half years undertaken a series of themed audits aimed at improving our child protection performance. Improving performance in terms of the experience for children and families but also to ensure our national return, is better than our statistical neighbours. These audits have been led by Calvin Smith, Service Manager for Children's Safeguarding & Support.
- 2.2 The audits have been undertaken by key decision makers within Warwickshire's child protection services e.g. Operation Managers, Team Leaders, Independent Reviewing Officers, managers from our Practice Improvement Service & Service Managers. The audit process is conducted by 15 – 20 staff members, and provides an action learning approach, encouraging reflection and learning within the auditing process.
- 2.3 After each audit, the learning has been shared in workshops with key practitioners e.g. social workers who complete child protection investigations and when appropriate with key partners. We then review progress and if necessary, repeat the audit and/or learning processes.

2.4 This audit seeks to provide a continuous cycle of improvement and has resulted in: -

- Our child protection numbers moving to below our statistical neighbour average;
- Our numbers of children subject to plans for over two years being below our statistical neighbour average;
- In the last four months, the average timescales to go to Initial Child Protection Conference, has moved to being better than our statistical neighbour average; and
- We are currently working on understanding and improving our rates for repeat child protection plans, where our performance is below our statistical neighbour and the England average.

2.5 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 and improve factors impacting the experience of the child protection process for families. For example, ensuring we capture the voice and experience of the child, the participation of parents/carers, whether plans are SMART. This process has included making recommendations to implement Restorative Practice within child protection processes, resulting in new agendas for strategy discussions.

2.6 While all systems can be improved, our child protection processes are now more timely, robust and restorative than they were two years ago. Our aim is a cycle of continuous improvement to provide Warwickshire children with the best child protection system and experience in England.

3. Financial Implications

3.1 Audits & action plans have been completed within existing resources. The reduction in child protection numbers has allowed a focus upon lower level & usually less costly interventions. For example, reducing the numbers of social workers in children's teams who undertake higher cost work e.g. court, child protection & looked after work. Freeing resources to expand our Strengthening Families Service, who provide intensive Child in Need support, preventing escalation. Being able to establish a dedicated Child in Care 14+ Team, in part by moving resources from safeguarding and support children's teams; extending our Edge of Care Services, such as expanding our Systemic Team.

4. Environmental Implications

4.1 None.

5. Supporting Information

- 5.1 The objective to improve out child protection performance began in early 2018 after our child protection numbers reached 592, a rate of 52.3 per 10,000, against a national rate of 43 per 10,000 and 36 per 10,000 for our statistical neighbours. The 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 the child protection process. A conclusion confirmed by OFSTED when they came for a focused visit. Interestingly the rise in child protection numbers was not distributed evenly across the county, with Warwick District witnessing the largest percentage rise, while Rugby District saw a fall.
- 5.2 The audit included a random sample of 80 children (no more than one from sibling groups) who went to an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) and became subject of a child protection plan. Auditors also looked at 50% of those children over the same period where the decision was taken at conference not to have a child protection plan. Auditors found that at each stage in the child protection process, there were children that did not meet the criteria to be in the process, including 10% of children made subject to a child protection plan, where auditors did not believe the criteria was met. It appeared that we had developed a relatively risk adverse system, where opportunities to support families on a child in need basis were missed. Interestingly in 59% of families a primary reason (there can be more than one) for going to ICPC was domestic abuse, higher than the national average. In part our response to domestic abuse, was found in our second audit to be part of the reason for Warwickshire having longer running child protection plans than our statistical neighbours.
- 5.3 This first audit made key recommendations aimed to change culture and practice, which have resulted over the last two years to a decline in our child protection numbers from 52.3 per 10,000 in February 2018 to 25.1 per 10,000 in March 2020. Although this has risen during the Covid emergency and currently stands at 28 per 10,000. The table below illustrates our progress in comparison the average for England and our statistical neighbours. Last year only Essex and Leicestershire had lower child protection rates than Warwickshire, within our statistical neighbour group.

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

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Warwickshire	42.0	38.8	49.0	29.8	25.1
Statistical Neighbours	39.4	35.7	34.4	34.7	TBC
England	43.1	43.3	45.3	43.7	TBC

- 5.4 Our second audit in November 2018, considered why Warwickshire children were more likely to find themselves subject to child protection plans for longer than child in our statistical neighbours. Our conclusion was that we were over assessing families and were taking too long to provide direct work to families. The direct work that would protect children and help parents to better meet their children’s needs, was in part being delayed by assessments. In addition to sharing the findings with decision makes and children’s teams we restructured our service offer, under the leadership of John Coleman, to better focus upon direct work. As a result of these changes, we have seen a significant reduction in the numbers of children on longer running plans.
- 5.5 This second audit considered the plans of 80 randomly selected children where the ICPCs made the children subject to a child protection plan and then looked at the progress of these plans at the 9-month review. We found that many plans were not SMART, were not written in simple English, they were overly long, included unnecessary actions and regularly asked for further assessments, particularly parenting assessments and domestic abuse risk assessments. For example, in 70% of cases a parenting assessment was asked for, yet when auditors looked at all the requested assessments, they found that 53.3% were not necessary. When we reviewed progress of these plans at the 9 month Review Child Protection Conference (RCPC), it was found that 34.1% of action points had not been started by professionals, in the main due to long waiting lists for parenting assessments (22% not started), domestic abuse risk assessments (12.2% not started) and domestic abuse direct work (19.5% not started). Warwickshire had children on child protection plans & at risk, at least in part because professionals did not have the capacity to start the work, not because parents were not engaging with us.

- 5.6 When we repeated this audit in May 2020, we found the plans had become SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely) because of our work and that the waiting lists for assessments had reduced significantly. This was achieved by making better use of enhanced children & family assessments and only conducting parenting assessments when we begin the Public Law Outline process. We moved staff from completing assessment to direct work, e.g. expanding the Domestic Abuse Team and directing more staff towards direct work in the Parenting Practitioner Team. There are still delays in direct work, which we are currently working on to further improve our service to families. We are for example using the transformation funding from WCC & the DfE to expand the Domestic Abuse Service, establish a Caring Dad's Service and expand the Family Group Conferencing Service. These developments will enable us to intervene earlier and better build upon the resources of families to help themselves, in brief help to better implement Restorative Practice.
- 5.7 We report nationally on children subject to plans for over two years and these figures have improved significantly. It is believed this to a large degree is down to the audits, our learning process, the redesign of our services and the role of the Children & Families Escalation Panel, chaired by Jo Davies (Service Manager for Practice Improvement & Principle Social Worker).

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.

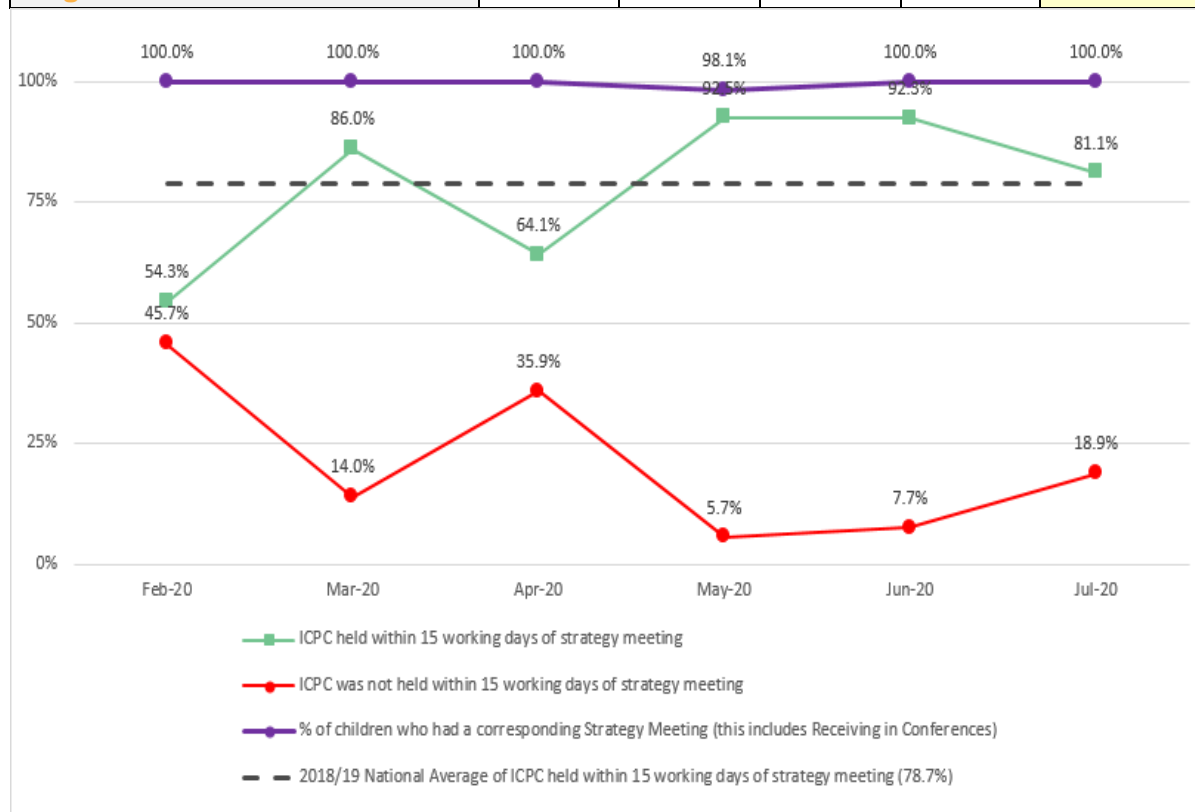
	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Warwickshire	4.9%	4.9%	5.9%	3.0%	2.3%
Statistical Neighbours	2.6%	3.3%	3.8%	3.7%	TBC
England	3.8%	3.4%	3.4%	3.3%	TBC

- 5.8 The focus of our next two audits was our relatively poor performance in respect of the timescale between a strategy discussion and Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC). Working Together sets a target of 15 days. It was concluded that we were not always following the recommendations of Working Together and had developed a culture of having repeat strategy discussions to make key decisions, decisions that Working Together say rest with the investigating social workers. We redrafted key documents and proceedings, shared these with the Safeguarding Partnership and obtained their agreement for change. We then delivered learning sets to all key managers and some partners, seeking to change practice and culture.

Table 3 below shows our performance up until the end of March 2020, while the graph illustrates our improved performance over the past few months, since we have embedded the changes. This improvement needs to be sustained but this performance is our best since 2015/16, when the method of calculating this time period changed.

Table 3 – The % 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.

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Warwickshire	100.0%	76.8%	72.6%	83.1%	67.8%
Statistical Neighbours	79.1%	80.4%	84.9%	84.7%	TBC
England	76.7%	77.2%	76.9%	78.7%	TBC



5.9 The audit we are currently working on relates to repeat child protection plans. Something that historically we performed reasonably on but where more recently we have seen our performance decline. A decline that was noted by OFSTED when they came for the inspection abandoned due to Covid. Given OFSTED's interest it is an indicator, we must be able to explain by their return and ideally have resolved the issue. Although interestingly, our partners. Leeds report they have seen a similar trend and they have also seen a significant reduction in child protection numbers since implementing Restorative Practice.

Table 4 - 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.

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Warwickshire	18.1%	20.8%	18.7%	18.6%	23.8%
Statistical Neighbours	19.0%	18.9%	21.6%	22.0%	TBC
England	17.9%	18.7%	20.2%	20.8%	TBC

5.10 We believe part of the decline in our performance for this indicator, is due to the progress we have made in respect of our child protection numbers. While the number of children subject to a repeat child protection plan has not risen by much, in fact by historical standards has declined, the percentage rise is significant because of the fall in the comparison number. It is also interesting to note that our percentage of short-term repeat plans since our audit process was introduced (two years ago) initially rose but is now consistently declining. We have also discovered in preparation for the audit that the average timescale between child protection plans is 42 months. Three and a half years is far too long to have kept children on plans, so that is not an option to address this issue but maybe a more proactive approach to supporting families at the end of child protection plans.

Table 5 – The average number of months between previous and current child protection plan being initiated.

Quarter	No. within 2 years	% within 2 years	Total No. repeat plans	% regardless of time	Total No. CP Starts	Average no. of months between prev and current CP
Q4 17/18	17	10.1%	26	15.4%	169	30
Q1 18/19	13	8.3%	19	12.1%	157	24
Q2 18/19	4	2.9%	30	21.6%	139	54
Q3 18/19	8	8.2%	15	15.5%	97	55
Q4 18/19	18	14.6%	32	26.0%	123	23
Q1 19/20	11	8.5%	22	17.1%	129	34
Q2 19/20	22	20.8%	33	31.1%	106	23
Q3 19/20	11	12.6%	23	26.4%	87	45
Q4 19/20	12	11.4%	25	23.8%	105	42
Q1 20/21	12	10.0%	38	31.7%	120	42

- 5.11 The audit has been delayed due to the impact of Covid but we do plan for it to be completed by the end of September. We will complete a random sample of 50 families with recent repeat plans. It seems likely that the action plan will include a more proactive approach to families where child protection plans have ended e.g. contacting them after three or six months to see how they are doing and if they would like further support, on a Early Help or Child in Need basis.
- 5.12 One indicator that our audits have not considered to date is the overview of child protection activity. This is interesting as it does show that our number of section 47 investigations has not changed significantly over the past four years, what has is the number of families we support outside of a child protection process. We have always advised managers/key decision makers to invoke Section 47 powers if they believe it is necessary but to ask the question, is a child protection processes the best way to support the family. The result of our themed audits appears to be more child in need work is being completed, which many families are more readily engaging with, as they find it less intimidating. So, we are continuing to work with families but in a different way. This is not to say there could not be improvement in this area, as we do hold relatively high numbers of strategy discussions and child protection investigations, possibly a theme for future audits.

Table 6 - Child Protection Activity between 2015-2020.

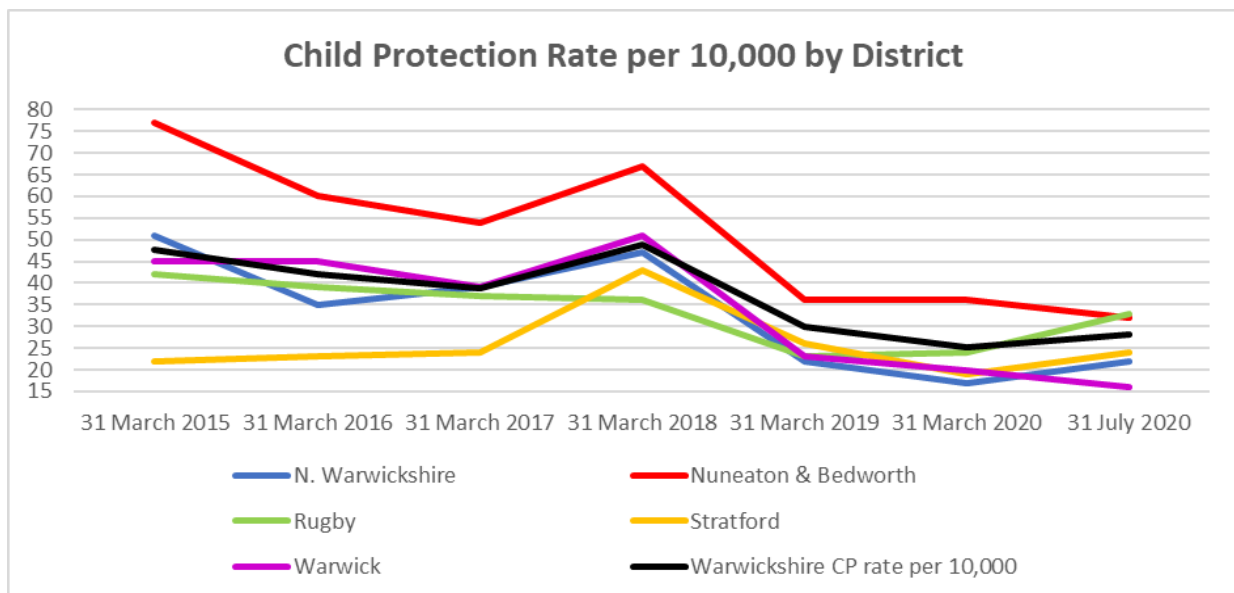
	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number of S47 Child Protection Investigations initiated	1084	1290	1426	1205	1306
Number of Children subject to an Initial Child Protection Conferences during the year	618	544	727	623	482
Number of Child Protection Plans initiated during the year	579	496	674	516	425
Number of Child Protection Plans closed during the year	639	532	544	734	473
Number of Children subject to Plans at 31 March	473	439	563	345	295

5.13 One area of the child protection process not captured in the CIN national return is the number of care proceedings issued. Warwickshire's Dual Status Policy, like that of other Safeguarding Boards propose that if we have a court order in place e.g. an Interim Care Order, we end the child protection plan. Thus, one-way child protection numbers can be reduced is to issue more care proceedings. In fact, in the first year our audits started the number of our care proceedings issued declined, last year the reduced was by just under 18%. Which enabled us to balance our Legal budget, a budget that included a savings target. Although this is a trend has reversed during the Covid emergency.

Table 7 – Child Protection Rates per 10,000 by District.

Child Protection Rate per 10,000 at Year End	31 March 2015	31 March 2016	31 March 2017	31 March 2018	31 March 2019	31 March 2020	31 July 2020
N. Warwickshire	51	35	39	47	22	17	22
Nuneaton & Bedworth	77	60	54	67	36	36	32
Rugby	42	39	37	36	23	24	33
Stratford	22	23	24	43	26	19	24
Warwick	45	45	39	51	23	20	16
Warwickshire CP rate per 10,000	47.7	42	38.8	49	29.8	25.1	28

Source: District level data is taken from historical performance reporting.



- 5.14 Another significant area of progress has been our efforts to narrow the gap in respect of child protection rates by district. While they are unlikely to ever be the same, the difference that existed seven years ago was significant and unreasonable, according to a piece of University research we engaged in some years ago. This research suggested the variance had a relationship with the approach that professionals took when taking into account the impact of low income. While our audit programme has not had a goal of narrowing the gap, bringing managers from across the county together to audit and share learning, has likely had an impact, as has our move to restorative practice. It may also be that the bringing together of line management structure of Children's Safeguarding & Support, that was begun seven years ago and finalised three years ago has also made a difference.
- 5.15 While not part of our audit timetable, we do receive weekly reports and the One Team Data Set, from Business Intelligence, to help monitor other indicators that tell us important things about the quality of our service. For example, the timeliness of the recording of statutory child protection visits, these are usually over 90% and in green. Positively during the Covid restrictions when virtual visits were allowed, our face to face visits have been consistently over 95%, evidencing our staff prioritising the need to see and support our most vulnerable children and families.
- 5.16 The Children & Families Senior Leadership Team are all committed to developing a safer and more time child protection service, and all are leading work that will enhance that system across our whole service e.g.
- Matt Greenhalgh (Service Manager) is working within the MASH, EDT and Initial Response Services, to improve timeliness and consistency at our front;
 - The new child protection training offer for schools, that is being devised by Marina Kitchen and her team (Service Manager – Early Help & Targeted Support), will support Designated Teachers to have a better understanding of thresholds and child protection processes;
 - Sally Nash (Service Manager – Youth Justice) and her team are developing an improved domestic abuse service, while also seeking to better embed contextual safeguarding, particularly within our Exploitation Team.
 - Sharon Shaw (Service Manager - Corporate Parenting) ensures safeguarding remains the top of the agenda in all the services she manages from Fostering to Leaving Care, services who support and protect some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

As a management group and a wider service, we seek to provide high support and high challenge to each other and our staff, to ensure we have a system that is best able to protect children but also to develop a service that is continually improving.

6. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

- 6.1 The Repeat Child Protection Plan audit will be completed by the end of September 2020, with any action plan associated with the audit being implemented by the end of October 2020.
- 6.2 We plan to continue to complete audit approximately every six months, allowing time to embed any necessary changes before preparing for the next audit. Our goal is a cycle of continuous improvement, thus embedding best practice and service for children in need of protection.

Background Papers

None

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

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